

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SUGAWA

イラスト ● 黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

キノの旅 VIII

the Beautiful World

電撃文庫



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キノの旅
VIII

the Beautiful World

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Frontispiece

“A Land with a Road”

— Go West! —

Frontispiece: "A Land with a Road" — Go West!

"Isn't it such a great road, Kino?"

"Yeah..."

"I say road, but it's actually more of a highway. It's my first time running through a road with such a clean surface, solid pavement, consistent width, gentle curves, and nice sceneries on both sides."

"Me too..."

"Cheers to this country's citizens for making something like this!"

"Sure... But you can't drink, Hermes."

"It's just a matter of passion! Honestly, I really feel like praising them when I meet them in person."

"Yeah... That would be nice, if only it were possible..."

"Why?"

"Who knows? I have no idea at all...how it's possible for every single person in a country to die. Because there's nobody here, there's no one we could ask..."

"Well, yeah. — Even so..."

"Even so?"

"I can't see the end of this road. At this rate, we're just going to slam into something. They should have at least made it so that the western wall could be seen."

"Indeed... We've been running nonstop since the day before yesterday..."

"If you don't arrive at the gates by the end of the day, you'll be violating your three-day rule."

"That's why I'm doing my best here..."

"Isn't it such a great road, Kino?"

"Yeah..."



Frontispiece

“The Land Where No Crime Can Be Done”

— Black box —

Frontispiece: "The Land Where No Crime Can Be Done"¹ — Black box —

Kino and Hermes had eyeglasses on.

Kino, of course, was wearing it on her face. Meanwhile, Hermes...

"Kino, isn't this weird?"

"You look great, I swear."

"Really? But it's so annoying."

...was wearing it in front of his headlights.

And then the bespectacled human and vehicle was greeted by a view of the country's interior as the inner gates opened before them.

—

A little while ago.

"Now, let me explain," the country's immigration inspector offered.

The luggage-laden Hermes, together with Kino who was clad in her brown coat, as well as the business-attired inspector were in a small room built within the walls.

¹ One of the stories in the second Kino no Tabi PS2 Visual Novel.

"Miss Kino, the object you're holding right now is a gadget in the form of eyeglasses that serves as a monitoring device."

There was a pair of eyeglasses in Kino's hands, just as the inspector pointed out. At first glance, it looked very much like normal glasses. However, attached on its sides where it would touch the temples were tiny contraptions the size of the tip of a pinky.



“The left one with the lens is a camera, while the one at the right is a sound recording device and power supply. That camera will record whatever Miss Kino sees, even at night. The same goes for the sound recorder. This means that all of your actions will be monitored. But that’s an obvious invasion of privacy, so the ones who can do the monitoring are—”

“Only the police or the court?”

“That’s right, Mr. Hermes. A person can’t even look at his own records. When a police warrant is issued, only then can the suspect’s records be viewed. Therefore, all criminal acts are exposed, no exceptions.”

“I see. So that’s why this place is called the ‘country where no crime can be done’.”

The inspector nodded enthusiastically in response to Kino’s words. Of course, he was wearing the aforementioned glasses.

“That’s right. It is clear to see that in this country, ‘all wrongdoings are exposed’. Everyone knows that this effort is all worth it. Before, crimes were frequent and murder was the top cause of death. Superficial action wasn’t able to remedy the situation, so we pooled together our wisdom and created this system. For the past several decades, public order has dramatically improved. Now, there are no other crimes except for those done on impulse, and even these are exposed immediately.”

“I see.”

“Uh-huh.”

“To protect this system, we created a law that prohibits removing these glasses whenever your body is in movement, with a few exceptions. When the user’s brain waves are not in a resting state, and the glasses detected that it was removed from the skin for more than thirty seconds, a warning is issued and the people nearby will be alerted with their glasses. The few exceptions are when you are sleeping, dressing up, putting on make-up, taking a shower, and so on. All over the country, there are eyeglasses charging stations that serve as support by allowing the user to get projected. The camera can also recognize if the user is doing one of the exceptions through the body’s form.”

“This is some amazing technology.”

“True, true. So amazing.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

After an embarrassed laugh, the examiner finally got to the point. He informed Kino and Hermes that the condition for entering the country was for Kino to wear the glasses during their three-day stay, just like ordinary citizens.

“That’s fine with me. I will do it,” Kino said with a nod. And then she asked the inspector, “By the way, what about Hermes? I think it’s a good idea to let Hermes wear one too.”

“Well, a motorrad cannot move by itself, so the law doesn’t really require it...”

“But in case of a traffic accident, it might be helpful if one is attached to Hermes...”

“Oh! That makes sense. Miss Kino understands the system very well! Okay then, I will have one made for Mr. Hermes right away!”

—



The bespectacled Kino and Hermes stayed in the country for three days. They rested and looked around, sold things they ought to sell, and bought things they needed.

It was a country with very good public order. No problems occurred and they caused no problems either.

“We did not break the speed limit, not even once.”

And soon it was time for them to depart.

“What are we going to do with these glasses?” Kino asked the inspector before the western gates.

“Once you’ve passed through the gates and stepped out of the country, you are no longer obliged to wear the glasses. Kindly hand them over to the guard at the outer gates. Of course, since you have not done anything illegal, all your records will be erased. You don’t have to worry about any invasion of privacy.”

After the inspector’s explanation, the glasses-wearing Kino glanced at the glasses-wearing Hermes. After some thought, Kino said, “If it’s possible, will you let us keep these? When we arrive in the next country, we would like to introduce to them this country’s wonderful invention. If we only talk about it, they might not believe that such advanced technology exists.”

“Oh.” The inspector was a bit surprised. “If it’s for something like that, then you can have it! By all means, use it to introduce them to our country’s ways. However, the battery will only last for two more days. Too bad, but it will lost its features.”

And so Kino and Hermes bid farewell to the inspector and guard, and proceeded on the road amidst the lush meadows towards the west.

—

“I just made a killing. A huge one.”

Kino muttered suspiciously as she rode through the meadows, her back to the walls that were getting smaller and smaller as they get farther away. Instead of the usual goggles, she was wearing the aforementioned glasses. And also, above Hermes’ headlights...

“Ah, enough already. Take these off.”

...the glasses were still attached.

“Just wait a bit more, Hermes. Only until the walls have completely disappeared from view.”

“Sheesh.”

And when Kino was sure that the top of the walls has vanished beneath the horizon, she cut Hermes’ engine.

Kino took out a metal lunchbox-like case from the box at the side of the rear wheel. Though it was rare of Kino to carry unnecessary things, the box was empty.

“Ah, so annoying,” Hermes grumbled.

And at last Kino removed the glasses from Hermes' headlights as well as from her own face. Then she took out a small pin and tinkered with the hole of the recording device. She poked it several times, and repeated the same action after a few seconds. Eventually, the glasses let out a beeping sound. She did the same thing to the other one.

“—Done. With this it will stop functioning and our records will be erased,” Kino said happily as she carefully wrapped the two glasses in a cloth. And just as carefully, she stowed them away in the metal box and put it back in the rear wheel box.

“In the next country, we can sell this for a high price and earn a big profit. What's more, we were lucky enough to be able to get two of it,” Kino explained merrily.

There was no longer a device to record her remark.

“You're unbelievably wicked, Kino,” Hermes said.

Kino did not seem to hear or care about Hermes' comment. At that moment, Kino was floating in her dreams of eating delicious food and buying new underwear.

“And we're also going to get new oil and tires for you, Hermes.”

“I approve! —It was such a great country, wasn't it?”

Kino nodded and started Hermes' engine.



Thoughts
are not
perfectly conveyed

— I know what you're thinking. —



Prologue

“The Beginning and End of a Journey at the Seaside”

— On the Beach · b —

Prologue: The Beginning and End of a Journey at the Seaside — On the Beach • b —
Prologue: “The Beginning and End of a Journey at
the Seaside” — On the Beach • b —

"Kino... are you leaving now?"

"Yes. Sorry for waking you. You can go back to sleep. I was planning to leave quietly."

"Like a fly-by-night, right?"

"Haha... the sound of Hermes' engine would have woken me anyway."

"Maybe. Kino's plans are always so musty."

"You mean, 'Messy'?"

"Yeah, that."

"I've written down a list of necessary provisions. You can use anything I'm leaving behind. I can't carry them, after all. I've also taken about a third of your valuables."

"I see. That sounds fair. Could I just ask you one more thing?"

"What is it?"

"I feel a bit bad for interrogating you like this, after all the help and support you've given me, but... Don't you ever think about settling in one place to live, Kino? Don't you want a safe, secure life where you're surrounded by loved ones, never having to worry about where to rest at night?"

"I don't know. At the moment... well, I don't think I'll ever think about it."

"That's completely fine with me. After all, it's a motorrad's joy to be able to always be on the move."

"'Joy', right?"

"Yeah, that."

"... Isn't it... painful?"

"It's not all fun."

"..."

"But it's not all pain."

"I see. I guess everyone has their own perspective on things."

"That's right."

"I'll see you off over there."

"Don't worry about it. Just stay here."

"All right... Then this is goodbye. Do you have anything to say before you leave...? I guess not."

"Goodbye, everyone."

"Bye. Stay sharp, you stupid dog."

"Thanks for everything."

"Pardon?"

"I don't think I've properly shown you my gratitude. Thank you."

"You're welcome. A lot happened, but we can still keep travelling..."

"So all's good that ends good."

"Right. ... 'All's well that ends well'?"

"Yeah, that."

"I see... Then I suppose this is goodbye, for now. I hope we meet again somewhere down the line."

"I'll see you later, then. But..."

""But'?"

"No, never mind. I'm sure I'll end up visiting your new homeland during my travels."

Prologue: The Beginning and End of a Journey at the Seaside — On the Beach • b —
"...And I hope I'll be there for good once that time comes. And I'll welcome you with open arms."

"Thank you."

—

"It's so nice to be able to ride again."

"Yeah. By the way, Kino?"

"Yeah?"

"You ended up not really saying anything, but if you run into him again..."

"Yeah, he..."

"He might be shocked half to death."

Chapter One

“A Land with History”

— Don't Look Back! —



"A Land with History"² — Don't Look Back! —

A car was running on a forest road.

It was a small, yellow, car in a condition so bad that it looked as if it's going to self-destruct at any moment. It rumbled and proceeded shakily on the road as white smoke sputtered from its exhaust pipe.

It was a vast land overrun with dense forests over flat terrain. The sun shone radiantly above the eastern horizon. A variety of birds were singing; it was a cool morning in early summer.

Two people were riding in the car. On the right-hand driver's seat was a rather short but handsome young man with his hands on the wheel, while a young woman with long, black hair was seated in the passenger seat at the left side. Meanwhile, the narrow back seat was packed with dirty luggage and bags.

"Master," the man spoke while driving. As the road was not in its best condition, he adjusted the steering wheel from time to time.

"What is it?" answered the woman called Master.

"We'll soon be arriving in the next country, so—"

The man proposed that they sell the gem that they have in the next country and exchange it for food, fuel, and gold dust. The woman contemplated for a while.

Also included in the second PS2 Visual Novel.

"I guess we have no choice, but—"

"We should sell it at the highest possible price. I know."

Just ahead the car, the top of the walls came into view.

—

It was not too big of a country, but it seemed rich.

The first thing they beheld upon entry was the vast expanse of fields. After running for a while, they reached the country's center that was lined up with stone apartments. The wide, streetlight-lined roads were dense with shops on both sides. It was a rather splendid townscape.

"This country looks great, doesn't it? Its population is comparatively small, and its technology is pretty advanced. This is the sort of place where we could sell at a high price," said the man in the driver's seat of the tiny car.

This car was the dirtiest among the numerous vehicles running on the street. They were laughed at as a luxury car overtook them.

"What you said about the selling part is true; however...there are too many policemen in this city."

The man agreed to the woman's observation. There were lots of people walking around the city in the morning, but there were as many policemen, who looked like soldiers with their green uniforms.

"The immigration procedures took awfully long. That guard must also be an MP," the man said. In this case, 'military police' refers to a system that combines the army and the police.

"Based on my experience, you cannot let your guard down in countries like this."

The man cast a sideways glance to the woman, and then asked, "Because of the bad public order?"

"No. — It's the authorities we should be wary of. Let's lay low in this country."

"... Roger."

The car stopped in front of a cheap-looking hotel.

—

"Well then, I'm going to cash out."

The man said from the cramped room of the hotel. He wore a square-barreled hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) on his left hip, but it was hidden by the thin, brown jacket that he wore. He put the tiny bag that contained the gem inside his breast pocket.

"Please come back as soon as possible. There's no need for us to stay long here. Let's depart by evening."

"I understand. I'll be back by noon. Meanwhile, you go and have a relaxing shower, Master," the man said as he left.

But noon has come and gone, yet the man did not return.

—

This is what happened to the man.

He showed the gem to a jeweler in the crowded shopping district. The shopkeeper's momentary surprise was replaced with a broad smile. Then he disappeared to the back of the shop and came back, proposing a price that surprised the man. The man readily agreed, imagining the woman's pleased face, and left the store with a grin. However,

"You there, wait."

The moment he came out to the streets, he was surrounded by four policemen.

"You are suspected of possession of illegal drugs," one of the cops said.

"Huh?"

Another policeman acted as if he was taking out his hand from the man's pocket. And then he exposed a small bag that he was holding.

"Look we've caught you red-handed. We are arresting you for possession of illegal drugs."

For a moment, the man considered pulling out his persuader and shooting to death all of the policemen—it wouldn't take him two seconds—but,

"..."

He stopped after giving it a second thought.

The man was handcuffed and his persuader and personal belongings were confiscated. As he was about to ride the police car, he saw the shopkeeper of the jewelry store pass money to the police. The man let out a small curse and pondered how, even at this state, he could beat down all of the police, steal the car, and lunge it into the jewelry store while he's at it. But,

"..."

He stopped after giving it a second thought.

—

"In short, your lover was arrested. In this country, illegal possession of drugs is a serious crime. It will be decided by the court from here on, but ten years in jail should be a fair estimate."

"I see. But I'd like to correct one thing. He is not my 'lover', he's just a travel companion," said the woman, who was in a room inside a large building at the country's center—an enormous and grandiose building octagonal in shape, built along with the spacious lawn that surrounded it.

A splendid clock tower stood at the center of the building, with a huge clock attached on each of the four sides facing east, west, south and north. The observation platform in its rooftop is higher than any building in the country, offering a 360-degree view of its surroundings.

It was in this room where the woman was seated in front of a desk, opposite a middle-aged police officer dressed in a uniform with important-looking decorations and embroidery while reclining comfortably in his seat. Several policemen stood around him. The outdoor scenery was visible from the gaps of the blinds, presenting a rather beautiful view of the sun setting to the west.

"Where is he right now?" the woman asked, and the middle-aged police officer answered that he was in an underground detention facility.

The woman took the opportunity to ask about the building. She was told that it was a historic structure that once served as a royal palace. But as the land was no longer ruled by a king, it was now used by various government offices. The clock tower was apparently a protected cultural site.

"It is the police who have the administrative rights to this building. In fact, this place is the police headquarters. I don't think other countries have headquarters as luxurious as this," the middle-aged policeman said proudly, and laughed.

"I see. That means it is the corrupt police who holds absolute political power, and use their authority to do as they please. Just as I thought."

The woman did not say these words, which accurately point out the situation. Instead, "I understand the circumstances, but as you can see, we are travelers. With your excellency's influence, it's not at all impossible to arrange for his deportation, is it not?"

"Hmm. How much are you willing to pay?"

"About this much," was the woman's reply to the middle-aged police officer's frank question, indicating a figure she wrote on a piece of paper. No one knew whether the amount was really all that she could give.

The middle-aged police officer leaned forward and peeked at the piece of paper.

"That won't do. It's not even worth discussing." He leaned back to his chair once more with a shake of the head, and continued, "You'd better leave the country immediately. I'll keep quiet about the offer you made here with us."

The woman replied with her imperturbable expression and tone, "I'll do just that. To begin with, he's just some person I got acquainted to during my travels. I really don't know anything about him, and it can't be helped if he was caught doing something bad. I'll leave him behind."

"That's a wise decision."

"Just one last thing. Can I bid him farewell?"

"We can't allow that since he has committed a serious crime."

"About this matter, I would be very grateful for any assistance you can lend me," she said while slowly taking out a single gold coin from her bosom. She placed it on top of the desk, covering the piece of paper she wrote on earlier. Seeing this, the police officer's face relaxed.

"Hmm... But since you are a traveler, I'll make an exception and allow you to talk with the criminal for a short time."

—

The middle-aged police officer and the woman, together with an entourage of policemen, went out of the room and made their way down a corridor.

"..."

Along the way, the woman looked left and right with only her eyes, checking the tags stuck in front of the rooms. The policemen around her took no notice at all.

Eventually, the party went down to the basement using an elevator, and passed through the gates of the entrance to the detention facility, which was protected by policemen.

They proceeded on a hall lined with jails on both sides. Drab rooms with only beds, toilets, and water closets continued on.

And, in one of the rooms, there was a person—a handsome, but slightly short man—sitting on the bed. He raised his face as he heard the sound of footsteps. When he recognized the face of the woman surrounded by the police,

"Ah, Sis! You came here to have me released, right?" He said happily, gripping the cage. But the woman replied mercilessly,

"You were found guilty of doing such a terrible thing, you know."

"Eh..."

"I even told you to stay clear of unlawful activities."

"No way... I was framed!"

"I hate causing trouble for other people. You know that, right? — Please face your trial here. There are countries I have to visit, so I can't wait for you."

"No way..." The man still gripped the cage and looked down helplessly. "Even if...I have lived my life so far without doing a single bad thing..."

"Then reflect on your crime here," said the woman. The policemen around her looked at each other and laughed.

The man spoke feebly. "Sis, there's something in my bag that I haven't shown you yet. Sell it in the next country to add to your traveling expenses. I have no use for it anymore. But please sell it for a high price because it's worth 434 silver coins when I bought it. You can also have the things I took with me this morning. Do as you like with them."

"I understand. I'll do that," the woman answered, and the man went back to his bed, still crestfallen. And then he collapsed face-down on the bed, curling up his body.

"Surely that's enough."

"Yes."

As commanded by the middle-aged police officer, the woman walked to the exit from the man's jail.

She came back to the entrance of the detention facility and asked the police clerk about the man's belongings. He took out the man's persuader, holster, belt, knapsack, and a tiny bag.

"What about the gem and cash he had?"

"Oh, those are possible funds coming from illegal drug trade, and were all confiscated as evidence," explained the middle-aged officer.

"I see," was the woman's only reply, and put the man's belongings in the knapsack.

"Now, everyone, I'll be taking my leave."

And she left the building.

—

Upon returning to the hotel room, the woman relaxed for a bit, and then firmly closed the blinds.

Then, she opened the man's luggage, a big backpack. At its bottom, there was a very sturdy plastic case that was about as big and thick as an encyclopedia. It looked like it can be used for beating people to death.

On one side of the case was a numeric keypad.

"..."

The woman keyed in 4-3-4 and the case opened smoothly. The inside was lined with a thick cushion cut out in several places, with a variety of contraptions neatly fitted in each.

"... Good grief. I wonder what that man did in the past. Well, let's put these to use."

The woman closed the case with a click.

"First is shopping. And then let's get out of this country," she muttered to herself.

—

The setting sun dyed the observation platform in the police headquarters in a yellow color.

The sound of a bell echoed from the lofty clock tower.

A police messenger came to the middle-aged police officer who was reclining on his chair.

"The woman earlier just left the country in a car. She only bought portable rations and traveling equipment. There was nothing suspicious with her actions."

"I see... I thought she was dangerous, but she was just a fool after all. Don't let her re-enter the country. Things might get troublesome."

"Yes sir. By the way, there's a message from the director who was attending a dinner party with politicians: 'Good job. We'll send your share later.'"

"Hmm. You also did very well."

"Thank you very much. —What are we going to do about that man?"

"He could have been deported just fine, but punishing him with twenty years of hard labor is not a bad idea. We can decide later on."

—

Night. It was quiet in the forest.

The stars twinkled in the clear, moonless sky.

The woman's shabby, yellow car was parked in a forest a bit ways off the country.

The woman was sitting beside it, making rummaging sounds as she worked on something.

"Now then," she said as she stood up. The scruff of her jacket was tightly closed, and she wore gloves and a knit cap. She was garbed in a single color—black. The holster of her favorite high-caliber revolver hung from her right hip, and she carried a knapsack on her back. Lastly,

"I see...what an interesting device."

Over her left eye, there was a strange cylinder that looked like a short and stout scope. A band wrapped around her head held it in place.

The woman gazed at the forest scenery through her left eye. The branches of trees swaying from the wind, as well as the moving animals, were amplified by the device. It created a world covered in a suspicious shade of green.

"'Night-vision equipment', is it? Fascinating," the woman murmured to herself.

This set of night-vision equipment was one of the items stowed inside the man's precious case. Other than this, there was the man's persuader silencer that was especially made for assassination, for-assassin-use plastic knives that can pass through metal-detectors, for-assassin-use wires that can be used to strangle someone from behind, for-assassin-use capsules containing poison that can pass off death as a heart attack, for-assassin-use stabbing pen with a poison-laced tip, and so on. It was an arsenal for various assassination tools.

The woman traversed the forest without making any sound. Later that night, she arrived at the walls of the country she just left. Its tall, black walls soared towards the sky.

After confirming that there were no guards nearby, the woman pulled out the revolver from her waist. She disassembled the front half of the revolver and removed the barrel. She took out a different barrel from her knapsack.

It was a strange device. A thick, metal jar was inserted at the tip of the barrel, and was securely fixed with a wire. The bottom of the bottle has been hollowed out.

The woman attached this to the revolver's body, and snapped open the hammer with her thumb. She pulled down the loading rod under the barrel, gripped firmly with her left hand, and aimed the bottom of the jar towards the top of the walls.

The woman fixed her aim, and pulled the trigger.

Thump.

There was a muffled shot, followed by a forceful quiver from the revolver's recoil. An iron claw, a three-hooked metal not unlike a ship's anchor, came out of the jar. The thin wire tied to the claw, which has been coiled inside the bottle, unwound as it came out.

The faint sound of the claws hitting and catching the top of the walls was heard. The woman returned the revolver to its original form and put it back in its holster.

She put on thick leather gloves and pulled the wire at different angles to make sure that it was stuck firmly.

"Here we go."

The woman began climbing the wall.

—

While the woman climbed the dark walls without making a sound,

Yawn

Inside the dimly lit detention cell, the man turned face-up and began to yawn and stretch.

"It'll probably take a bit more time. Maybe I should sleep."

He rolled over, and slept.

—

Even though it was almost midnight, the shops in the country's entertainment district were still crowded. Drunken customers happily come and go.

In one corner of the street, a policeman stood guard by himself with his back on the dark alley. The young man gazed at the street with a bored expression, tapping his palm with the baton in his other hand.

Two dark arms stretched from the darkness of the back alley. One arm closed in on the guard's mouth, and the other one wrapped around his neck. The arms returned to the darkness without a sound.

No one noticed that one policeman disappeared from the street.

—

It was well past midnight.

The lively entertainment district has subsided, and only a few drunks were lying about on the quiet street,

Pop!

It was like the sound of escaping air, but much louder. The noise swiftly resonated.

"Heh?"

A nearby drunk opened his half-closed eyes. What was reflected in his eyes was a cloud of smoke rising from a trash can that has started to burn.

"A-ah..."

He stood up as he muttered, and recklessly held out his hands towards its warmth. At that moment,

Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop!

Successive explosions were heard in every corner of the street.

"Huh?"

The man's wide-open eyes reflected the bright light of the burning trash cans.

Police cars and fire trucks rushed in with bellowing sirens.

When he heard these sounds, the man in the detention facility opened his eyes. He sat on top of the bed, stretched, and let out a big yawn.

Amidst the nonstop blaring of the sirens, he could make out the distant clatter of running footsteps from the building's upper floors.

With such noise as his backdrop, the man used the toilet, washed his hands and face, and began to exercise.

"Zero-one-two, three-four. Five-six, seven-eight."

He moved his body gently, relaxing his muscles, and ended his exercise with a deep breath.

"Here goes..."

The man gripped the cage, and shouted in a voice loud enough to be heard through all the clamor.

"Hey, guard! What's with the commotion? It's so annoying I couldn't sleep!"

"Quiet! It's none of your business so shut your trap!" the guard yelled back from the entrance of the detention facility.

"Eh, but this commotion is not normal is it? Something big must be happening, right?"

"Shut up! There was no contact from above, and I was about to go and ask!"

"Is that so? You're such a hard worker. If you find out, kindly tell me—"

"Shut up! —Ugh!"

"Huh? What's the matter —?"

No answer came from the guard, who only let out an unpleasant scream.

Instead, another policeman came walking down the corridor and stopped in front of the man's jail.

"I knew you'd come for me, Master. —I'm sorry for letting down my guard."

"Good grief, you're really an apprentice I had to look after."

The one wearing the police uniform was the woman called Master. She wore the uniform tightly over her other clothes, and hid her long hair underneath the uniform cap. At first glance, she looked like a refined young man.

The woman quickly opened the man's jail with a key, and tossed him the knapsack she was carrying.

"Inside is your persuader, as well as a set of uniform. Change your clothes."

The man took the sack and started to change. Meanwhile, he asked, "Where my 'toys' helpful?"

"Well, in a way. — We'll leave this place once you're finished changing."

"What are we going to do?"

The man stuffed the clothes he has taken off into the knapsack once he has finished changing into the police uniform.

"We'll walk into the building from here."

"Eh? Shouldn't we escape right away?"

"Right now it would be impossible to get out the country. The gates will definitely be closed, and the security will be tight. It's unreasonable to break through the gates with just the two of us. Eventually, people will come here as well."

"That's true, but...what should we do?" the man asked.

"What would you do?" The woman returned the question. The man's eyes registered an unusually serious expression.

"Let's see... I'll hide at once in a place where I can't be found, for instance, in the attics or in the sewers. The search party will be tired by the third day or so, and by that time, I'll immediately leave the country secretly, or by force, if necessary."

"That makes sense, but not quite correct."

"Oh?" The man had a rather disappointed look on his face.

The woman revealed the answer with an amused smile, "Waiting it out for three days before leaving is correct. However, hiding is not."

"Then what is?"

"We'll go on a rampage. First let's go to the third floor, where there's food and weapons. You've had plenty of rest while in jail, right? If you don't want to get rusty, you should do some serious fighting once in a while. Also, the scenery from a high place is quite breath-taking."

"... Ah!"

A gleeful expression crept on the man's face as he gradually comprehended, then he laughed fiercely.

* * *

"Then, what happened to the two after that, Kino?"

A motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) asked.

The motorrad was loaded with plenty of luggage on both sides and on top of its rear wheel. It was running leisurely on a road inside a forest, with the autumn foliage fluttering around it.

"Yup. After that—" The motorrad's driver called Kino answered. She was wearing a brown coat, the excess hem of which was rolled up to her thighs. Goggles were strapped on her face, and she had on a brimmed hat with flaps covering her ears. She was considerably young, around her mid-teens.

The autumn sky was clear and not a single cloud can be seen. The bright sun announced the time of the day.

Kino answered the question while letting the motorrad run slowly. "Aside from the streets, Master also planted explosives and incendiary bombs in police cars and power stations. As a result, the headquarters was in chaos, and they could walk to the arsenal in their disguise without being discovered. Most of the police force was dispatched due to all the commotion Master caused. When they went into the arsenal and ransacked it for persuaders, not a single one found them suspicious, as they were dressed in police uniforms, and they stunned a few who stopped by the arsenal. Then they filled up a trolley with sniping rifles, small rapid-fire persuaders, ammos, and all sorts of explosives."

"Whoa, scary. —It's just like 'dancing the mambo', huh?"

"That's right, Hermes," Kino agreed so easily that the motorrad called Hermes fell silent for a while. Then he pulled himself together, "—Um, please continue Master's story."

"Ok. After they took all the weapons they could carry, the two headed next to the food storage, and loaded another trolley with portable rations and drinking water. Because what they were doing then was so suspicious, they had to knock three policemen in a nearby room unconscious."

"And then, and then?"

"And then, they let out a rumor that bombs were planted inside the building. They activated the alarm and threw flares here and there. Everyone in the building scurried out. After that, they boarded the elevator to the top floor, carrying the two trolleys with them."

"The top floor? They didn't escape? I was certain that they would escape by mixing in with the fleeing crowd."

"It's completely the opposite. Master and her apprentice encamped with their luggage in the rooftop of the clock tower, which, though not wide, was the highest place in the whole country. They blew off the cable of the lone elevator leading there, and let it fall all the way to the basement."

"Ka-bam!"

"It was almost dawn. They took aim at the people who evacuated outside, as well as at the exhausted policemen who were just coming back after the commotion has finally settled down, and—"

"Bang?"

"Yes. From the top of the tower, they fired at every single person outside using their sniper rifles. They shot the tires of the cars so that they wouldn't move, and picked off the people who fled the cars one after the other. From such a high position, they had a perfect view of the people running across the wide-open square. There was no way out," Kino said indifferently.

"Scary!" Hermes exclaimed. "So they killed every single one of them?" Hermes asked, but Kino only shook her head as she drove.

"Wrong. That's what amazing about Master. She did not kill a single one."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"It was deliberate. She intentionally avoided their heads or chests, and aimed at their legs. Thick blood vessels run through the thighs, so she did not target them, either. She only aimed at the non-fatal spots on the knees or shins, and accurately hit them with her rifle."

"Ah, so that they can shoot down the ones that would come to the aid of the wounded moaning for help, right? Just like any good sniper."

"That's wrong too."

"Oh?"

"The two of them shot neither the people crawling to escape nor the ones who were helping."

"Why? How come?"

"I also asked her the same question. Master gave me some time to think about it, but I only learned the answer when she continued her story."

"Then I give up. Continue the story, Kino."

"Okay. It is connected to the reason why they climbed the clock tower instead of escaping. Master knew full well that they couldn't possibly break through the gates with just the two of them."

"Well, that's because there would be a lot of people positioned there to securely protect it and make sure that no one will escape."

"That's why they decided to wait until the citizens begged them, 'We will open the gates, so please pass through.'"

"Ah, I see. It was a siege, wasn't it? I finally get it!" Hermes exclaimed in glee, and Kino gave a small nod.

"Yes. They barricaded themselves at the top of the clock tower, and sniped anyone who comes near. This way, the building can no longer be used, and the everyday work of the people was interrupted to a great extent. The police tried to get in one way or the other. But—"

"They were being shot."

"Yep. To them, being shot in the leg is worse than getting killed. If instead, they see their comrades getting shot cruelly to death, it will fire up their desire for vengeance, and their fighting spirit will rise. But when they see their companions getting shot, screaming in pain, they start to have such thoughts as 'What if I'm the next one?', and hesitate. Humans whose jobs revolve around fighting are far more terrified of being in pain than being killed on the spot. In any case, their morale is down."

"That makes sense."

"Even so, the police tried to do their best in front of everyone. They used armored trucks and tried to break into the building on both sides."

"But to no avail."

"Master thought so too, and it seemed that her student, who was framed and jailed, got fired up. He could snipe through the eye of a needle and still wouldn't miss. All the troops that broke through were sent to the hospital, and it took lots of ambulances to accommodate the wounded. Once everything settled by noon, they dropped a letter in a sealed envelope. Of course, they used police equipment."

"What was written in it? Something like, 'If you don't want any more casualties, let us leave right away!'"

"Nope. They didn't write something so blatantly threatening. It was more like this:

Dear Sirs,

The wind hints of the approaching summer, but we are glad to see that everyone in the police force is becoming more spirited by the hour. Well, we two scoundrels decided to turn this place into a graveyard, and so until our bows break or until we run out of arrows, we will defend this place to the last of our strength, and we intend to rampage to our heart's content. For the two of us are unskilled, we request that you grant us your guidance and encouragement.

Yours Truly

P.S. We set up loads of bombs on the stairs up the clock tower, so if you don't want to lose this historic building, kindly refrain from using the stairs.

When Kino finished speaking, only the sound of Hermes' well-maintained engine could be heard in the forest.

Eventually, Hermes whispered, "Scary."

"Yup, scary. — At that time, they had no idea what was going on in the heads of the policemen, but at that moment, they must be considering that it would be better to let the two escape."

"Scary."

"Yup, scary. — And of course, the commotion has already made it into the news, and the situation was made public. It was even broadcasted live on radio."

"That is so stupid."

"Yes. Master thought so too. The two of them were also listening to the radio, so they were saved because they learned every move of the police. At any rate, the day soon turned to night, and the police tried several times to approach stealthily. However, Master's student had a night-vision device attached to his rifle, and so they were beaten at their own game. The two of them slept in shifts, and remained in their positions even while eating and drinking."

"Well, how long did they keep it up?" Hermes asked.

"Three days and three nights," Kino answered, and explained.
"The situation was—

[Ehem, you two over there, can you hear me?! You bastards can't escape! As you wish, that place will be your grave! If by any chance you don't die there, you will be hanged after being paraded in the city! You'd better prepare yourselves!]

Zing.

[You guys are completely surrounded! So surrender like real men! If you surrender obediently, we'll spare your lives!]

Ping.

[Is there anything you want to say? Can't you see we're being generous by even trying to hear your side?!]

Zping.

[Sirs, our side is willing to negotiate. It's not a bad deal, you know.]

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat.

[Uh, how are you doing? We would like to ask for a cease-fire to be able to talk, and agree on terms for our mutual survival. What do you think?]

Brat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat.

[Good morning. There is something we would like to tell you. If you wish to leave the country, we will gladly allow it.]

Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang.

[We are begging your excellencies. Please pacify your anger, and leave our country.]³

Bam. Bang. Boom.

[We beg you. From the bottom of our hearts, please stop this. Please—]

Zping-rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-brat-tat-tat-tat-ba-ba-ba-bang-pew-pew-ping.

[Save me! Please stop already!]

"Now that you mention it, it would be better for us to leave the country quietly than to die here."

[R-really?]

"Well, how much are you willing to pay?"

[...]

³ It is not so obvious once translated, but in Japanese, this dialogue is quite comical due to the change in the tone of the police officer from extremely rude to extremely polite. This is particularly observed with the pronouns used for 'you': *kisama* --> *omae* --> *kimi* --> *anata* --> *anata-sama* (arranged from rude to polite).

"How much are you willing to pay?"

[... Um, will the amount I write down here do?]

Zing.

[We'll give more!]

—Well, something like that."

"Demons."

"At any rate, rather than prolonging the situation and letting the number of casualties increase, they realized that there will be less damage if they just 'deport' them. Master and her student ripped off the government's money, took the police commissioner who brought it to them hostage, and made him drive the escape car up to the gates."

"And they all lived happily ever after. The end. Wow, what a great story. —Ah, I see it."

Just ahead of the forest where Kino and Hermes was riding in, the top of the walls became visible.

"Just in time. So, in that country, we will keep it a secret how I obtained 'Canon'. We will go 'shopping' in the flea market. And of course, never ever talk about Master's story."

"Roger."

"However, since we're in this country, I want to know what remained of that story."

"It must have been a historical event, right?"

"Unless, what Master told me was nothing but a nonsensical, exaggerated lie."

"All of a sudden, I don't want to believe it—"

"Yeah..."

"But we're talking about Master here. She's capable of anything."

"Yeah..."

Kino suddenly looked back. She gazed at the road they just came through. There was nothing but the leaves dancing on top of the road.

"It's all right. There's nobody," said Hermes.

"So look ahead as you run."

—

Kino entered the country around noon.

Kino and Hermes stood in front of the lawn-enclosed, octagonal building with a clock tower in its center. They stopped at the end of a road that extends straight towards it. There were people enjoying a picnic on the lawn under the clear autumn sky. A few policemen could be seen among them.

"It's a good thing the historical building remained."

"Yeah," Kino agreed to Hermes' words.

"It's octagonal, without a doubt."

"And there's the clock tower too."

Kino launched Hermes and ran on the road surrounding the building.

"Kino, go a little slower."

"Hmm?"

In response to Hermes, Kino loosened the right-hand accelerator. Hermes told her that there's a monument beside the building's entrance, and Kino turned in that direction.

Kino stopped Hermes in front of the monument and cut the engine. The monument was not large, and was placed obscurely on top of the grass.

Only small characters were carved on the stone. Kino set down Hermes' stand and crouched in front of the monument.

"Kino you're blocking the view. What's written on it?" asked Hermes.

"The characters are small and hard to read... It doesn't seem to be a commemoration stone for the building's foundation, though..." Just as Kino muttered this,

"Actually, that is—"

"Whoa—!"

A loud voice sprung from behind them, surprising Hermes. Kino stood up and turned around.

It was a bald old man with a cane. He looked considerably old, and with him was a four or five year old girl who seemed to be his granddaughter or great-granddaughter.

"Ah, sorry if I surprised you. That is a monument built to commemorate the two heroes who saved our country," said the old man.

Hermes asked, "Two heroes?"

Kino took off her hat and bowed to the old man and the girl. "I'm a traveler, but I have interest in the history of countries. Can you please tell me the story?"

The old man smiled. "Why, of course. When I was still young, political corruption has grown widespread in this country," he began.

"Ooh. And then, and then?"

"Even the police were involved in the misdeeds, and everywhere you go, there's this bad atmosphere. At that time, two travelers with a strong sense of justice came to our country. They spoke up on behalf of the citizens, saying 'This should not be done!' or 'This is wrong!'" The old man recounted passionately.

"After that, after that?" Hermes chimed in happily.

"After that, the two travelers, backed by the power of the masses, came and petitioned in this building—in this government building."

"Amazing!"

"Justice and courage overflowed from the two. In fact, their speech lasted for four days. Their zeal touched our politicians and police officials, who were deeply embarrassed of their actions until then and promised not to do bad things in the future. Thanks to that, this country is now rich and happy. And they lived happily ever after. The end."

When the old man finished speaking, the girl whose hands he was holding jumped in delight, "Grandpa's stories always end with 'happily ever after'!"

"There, there. You'll make this old man fall over with your jumping," the old man chided her with a smile.

"I see, so this monument was for that historic event," Kino remarked.

"That's right. Even now, the story about the 'two travelers of justice' is written in our history textbooks. When this child grows up, she'll also learn it at school."

Kino thanked the old man, and then asked, "This is another story, but...what happened to your legs? In this country, there are so

many old people, particularly men, who are carrying canes with them."

For about five seconds, the old man's face twitched and froze. The girl looked up at him wonderingly.

"Uh, w-well! —People my age were born with bad legs, you see. The c-cane-manufacturers made a k-killing out of it, too," the old man stammered, his expression still stiff. And as he laughed, he gripped his cane firmly, dragged one foot and walked away together with the girl.

When the two have vanished from sight, "What now, Hermes? Want me to read the monument just in case?"

"Nope," Hermes answered immediately. Kino put on her hat, straddled Hermes, and started the engine.

Kino rode Hermes slowly, the building behind them. They began to converse as soon as they were out of earshot.

"That was something. Kino, which one do you think is true?"

"You can tell, can't you, Hermes."

"Yeah. But it's an optimistic country, in a way. And being optimistic is a good thing."

"In a sense, maybe." Kino agreed with Hermes, laughing lightly. And then,

"But, what will you do if Master makes a comeback?" Hermes asked casually.

Kino suddenly looked back. She gazed at the road they just came through. There was the form of the big building with the clock tower.

"It's all right. There's nobody," said Hermes.

"So look ahead as you run."

Chapter Two
“A Tale with Love”
— Dinner Party —



"A Tale with Love" — Dinner Party —

There was a lone road in a mountainous region where winter has just made its presence known.

The mountains' gentle slopes were lined up with slender trees that lost their leaves during autumn. As a result, there was very little color anywhere; everything had a monochromatic shade of light brown.

The dazzling morning sun brought out the bold contrast between the clear, blue sky and the forest. Even so, the occasional strong gust of wind was cold and dry.

The road ran level with the slopes, looking as if it was sewn on the mountains. It was dismal and bare due to the dry atmosphere, and was not even littered with fallen leaves. It was only wide enough to let one car pass through.

And on this road ran a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly).

Its rear wheel had boxes on both sides and was topped with traveling luggage. It raised a thin cloud of dust as it proceeded on the road roughly to the west.

The rider was wearing a long brown coat, the excess hem of which was rolled up to her thighs. She wore a brimmed hat with flaps covering both ears, and goggles with a silver frame that was already peeling off in places.

Before each curve, the rider would loosen the accelerator, incline the motorrad while keeping her gaze forward, and gradually accelerate once again as the road straightened out. As soon as they passed through the first mountain, the next mountain came in sight.

While running, the rider of the motorrad opened her mouth, and let out a lifeless voice.

"Ah..."

"What's the matter, Kino?" the motorrad asked. The rider whose name was Kino replied with a sigh,

"I'm hungry."

"Then stop and rest! If you collapse from hunger—" The motorrad nagged.

"Fine, fine. Riding a motorrad is a sport, and so on. It's just like running, etc. And so the moment... I've heard that countless times already, Hermes," Kino continued.

"If you know, then you should do it," the motorrad called Hermes answered incredulously.

"Well, it was bad enough that the previous country was in ruins," Kino said as she went past a curve, and then continued, "If only it were not, I would have been able to relax and eat something delicious as planned."

"My sympathies, Kino. I thought that country we visited was just recently abandoned; but it seemed like it was the work of a terrible storm. There was not a speck of food, only the rolling white bones of corpses."

"You sure are lucky, Hermes. We were able to scrape up plenty of fuel from junk cars... Thanks to that, I had to put up with the stench of that old fuel."

"Good job."

"Well, thanks. Moreover, there's very little crop in this forest... I was wondering if there were animals that could be eaten around here, so I've been keeping close watch for some time, too."

"You're free to shoot if anything shows up. But there are no squirrels, let alone deer."

Sigh

Kino and Hermes both fell silent and continued to ride impassively.

It was a little before noon. After they finished ascending the slope that appeared before them, and when they have crossed over its gentle ridge, an enormous basin came into view.

And in that basin, there were people.

—

"What could that be, Kino?"

"Who knows...?"

Kino and Hermes slowly descended the hill road. As they approached the basin, the mountain changed into a dry land completely devoid of trees and grass.

There were hoards of people just ahead the road. People have gathered by the hundreds, and the center of the basin looked as if it would be completely filled with humans. Tent-like structures could be seen amidst the crowd.

"They don't seem too happy."

"I wonder if they are refugees..."

"It looks that way," Hermes agreed.

The assembly of people buried the center of the basin, turning it into a black carpet. There were so many people that the ground was barely visible. The road that continued to its center looked like a thin, brown line amidst the black mass. Beyond the cluster, there was a big hole on the ground.

Kino and Hermes descended further down the hill and approached.

The people were in a terrible condition.

Despite the cold weather, everyone wore tattered clothing. The people were abnormally thin without exception—their cheeks hollow, their limbs like sticks. Only their big, blank eyes could be discerned from their dirty faces. There were people sitting or lying down on the ground, people on their sides who were barely moving except for their breathing. People were tightly packed inside the tents built here and about.

Kino parked Hermes before this mass.

"What a shock. How many people do you think are there?"

"Beats me... But there's a tent that looks different from the rest over there on the left slope."

On the south side, people could be seen from a tent that was slightly separated from the rest.

"From the looks of it, those are army troops. They're wearing uniforms, and some of them even have persuaders (Note: A gun)," Hermes observed, and then asked, "What are we going to do in the meantime?"

"It would be great if there is someone we could talk to, someone who could explain to us what's going on," Kino said, and Hermes agreed.

Kino unfastened the front of her coat, and launched Hermes without removing it. Its hem slowly trailed in the wind as they rode closer to the ragged crowd.

Most of the people who turned their blank gazes towards Kino stood up. They were typically adult men carrying what appeared to be sticks in their hands.

They walked on the road, blocking it off. Then they glared at the slowly approaching motorrad.

Upon seeing what waited ahead, Hermes spoke, "I think they're going to attack. I'm sure you look tasty to them, Kino."

"That would be troublesome," Kino replied casually.

"Can you fire two or three shots?"

"I told you, didn't I? Very hungry—I am."

"Oh, to emphasize you even used perverse word order."

A few seconds of silence passed after Hermes' remark. During that interval, they had gotten much closer to the dark mass of men barring their way.

Eventually, Kino asked Hermes, "... Um, 'reverse word order'?"

"Yeah, that," Hermes said, but he didn't stop,

"Your reaction was so late. You must be really starving."

—

"Excuse me, will you please let me pass?" Kino said. She stopped before the cluster of men who glared at her as they obstructed the way, but she did not alight nor turned off Hermes' engine.

"..."

The men did not say anything. They only turned their gaunt, ghoulish-like faces towards Kino.

"Everyone, if you don't move, you'll get run over by this brash rider over here," Hermes said.

"How mean," Kino complained.

Eventually, a man spoke up in a lifeless voice.

"... Anything will do."

"What?"

"Anything will do... Share us some food... Whatever little you have... Everyone's hungry."

"Me too," was Kino's immediate reply.

And then she reached out for her right thigh. The hand that came out from underneath the coat gripped a single hand persuader. It was a high-caliber revolver that she called by the name 'Canon'.

Upon seeing this, the men heaved a sigh and kept silent.

Soon after, a shrill gunfire echoed.

The shot came from within the crowd. The men turned around and walked with frail steps to the side of the road. A four-wheel drive came running on the road towards Kino, driving away the people by the sides. Aboard it were four soldiers wearing green uniforms. They fired their persuaders several times towards the sky as warning.

The four-wheel drive stopped in front of Kino who had already holstered Canon. The person riding in its passenger seat told her to follow along until they reach the end of the road. Kino consented and answered with a gesture, and headed in the same direction as the other vehicle.

The four-wheel drive advanced on the road sandwiched by the refugees, with Kino and Hermes following from behind. A soldier on-board the vehicle held his persuader in a stance devoid of openings. The form of the two vehicles was reflected in hundreds of blank eyes.

—

Halfway through the cluster of people, there was a road that branched off to the south. The four-wheel drive turned to this path, and Kino followed. Once again, they drove amidst the refugees, and finally reached a road gently climbing up the slope. They went past the mass of refugees and headed towards the tent at the end of the road. In front of this tent was a fence made of thick logs.

The gate that was built on the road was protected by several soldiers armed with persuaders. When the four-wheel drive approached, a bar with red and white stripes lifted to let them pass. It was lowered as soon as Kino finished passing through.

It was an army's camp. Green tents were lined up evenly, with soldiers standing on watch, or sitting and taking a rest. Cars and trucks were parked all about, and right beside each was a drum of fuel.

Kino stopped Hermes and took off her hat and goggles. Among the soldiers who observed, the man from the passenger seat got off and approached. Kino lightly bowed her head.

"Well, that was dangerous. If you had handed them just one candy, they would have flocked around you until you're dead."

"My thoughts, exactly."

"Since our forces are here to protect our comrades and our equipment, we wouldn't have been able to help you even if you got attacked, miss traveler."

"Is that so? But you were a big help. Thank you very much." Kino expressed her gratitude.

"Ah. It was purely 'by chance' that our regular patrol caught sight of you. — You are pretty lucky, miss traveler," the man said nonchalantly, then guided Kino and Hermes to a tent. The tent, which was supported only by a pole and roof, was built slightly apart from the others.

Over there were a number of officials wearing decorated uniforms, high in both rank and age, surrounding a table.

"We have brought along this traveler who happened to pass by, and whom we found 'by chance'."

"I see. Good job, Sergeant. You can go now."

After the sergeant saluted and left, Kino introduced herself and Hermes.

One man introduced himself as the general. It was a man who, probably because of his imposing moustache tightly stretched on both sides, effected an air of self-importance. Afterwards, he informed Kino that they were the army of a neighboring country.

"What's going on?" Hermes asked tersely. From their location, they could see very well beyond the fences the bottom of the basin down the slope, and the refugees in it.

"Oh, you mean them? Well, let me answer your question," the general said while fixing his beard with his fingertips. And then he turned in the direction of the refugees. "There are many small countries in this area, but those people are originally from a country a bit to the east from here."

"We saw it yesterday. Indeed, there was not a single person there. It was quite a sight."

"Then I'll make the story short. —For several years, no crops grew in this area because the summers were too cold. A record-breaking crop failure continued. And because of the negligence of the leader of that country, the problem of food provisioning was not resolved, until finally the country collapsed. Those who had strength escaped, but most of the people who couldn't do anything became hungry refugees and wandered towards this basin."

"Uh-huh. Do the surrounding countries have any plans to help?"

"Hmph. We would like to help if possible. But our country and our neighbors have our hands full with the same crop failure, and we don't have spare provisions to help to that extent."

"I see."

"Without much choice, our country and neighbors have decided not to let them leave this basin so that they will not advance any further. And so we sent out our armies and kept watch in shifts."

"What will become of them?" Kino asked.

The general answered, "There's nothing we can do for them. As we speak, a number of them die from hunger or illness. If several tens of people die each day, eventually no one will be left come spring. The only thing left for us to do is to drop the corpses in that large hole and fill it up with quicklime."

"I see," Kino said. A weak, cold wind blew, ruffling Kino's coat and blowing down the basin.

"By the way, miss traveler."

The general trained his gaze on Kino with a somewhat sinister look.

"Yes?"

"It's almost noon. —Care to join us for lunch?"

—

"It's very delicious. I'm impressed."

Kino, in her black jacket and wearing a napkin around her neck, was sitting at a table under the roofed tent among the officials. A magnificent meal was lined up before them on the table.

The main course was a fat and juicy roasted ham steak in raspberry sauce and boiled sausages with pickled cabbages. There was a side dish of carrots and broccoli salad, which was warm but was not steaming due to the cold weather. It was served along with fresh mayonnaise. Furthermore, they were served a rye bread called kommissbrot⁴ and a bottle of salt-free butter. There were fruits like apples, pears, and grapes. There was also hot tea in a pot and honey to go along with it.

Kino immediately replied with an 'of course' to the lunch invitation of the general. And just as the general told her, she did not hesitate at all, and ate the food with gleaming eyes. Hermes who was parked behind her remained silent.

⁴ Kommissbrot is a type of bread supplied to the German military during wartime. Literally, it's 'army bread'.

"... It's a good thing that you liked it," the dumbfounded general replied with a forced laugh.

From the table where Kino and the rest were seated, the refugees at the bottom of the slope, who were suffering from hunger and despair, were in plain view. The fragrance was carried by the wind and reached them.

At this table, Kino continued eating heartily, but only enough so as not to appear ill-bred.

"General, among the food I have eaten until now, this black bread is the best."

"That's good to hear. Later, I'll convey that compliment to our bread-baking unit."

"Please do."

As Kino cut up a large portion of the ham steak and carried it to her mouth, the general asked,

"By the way, miss traveler, is 'cold-heartedness' the most important emotion you should carry when traveling?"

Kino answered as she finished chewing the ham.

"No."

"Oh, then what is it?"

"That is, love for yourself. I was taught that loving yourself more than others, in any circumstance, is the most important thing of all. — This ham is also very delicious."

—

"We'll be taking our leave. Miss traveler, please take your time."

"Thank you very much, General."

The bearded general and the other officials left the table as they finished eating. Most of the plates had leftover food.

Only Kino and one other person were left at the table.

It was a rather fat man whose body and face were both plump. His uniform looked quite tight on him.

He was slowly but surely cleaning up his own plate.

"... Hmm? Oh."

He noticed Kino's gaze, and then a light, awkward smile appeared on his face before he spoke.

"I'm doing my best so that nothing will be left."

Kino, who had cleaned up her own plate nicely, looked at him while wiping her mouth with a napkin. He carried the last broccoli to his mouth with a fork and finished chewing.

"I know it looks like I'm just gorging myself—" He began to talk to Kino who was seated opposite him, slowly drinking her tea. "But you see, when I see those people dying from starvation right before my eyes but can do nothing to help them, I feel like it's my duty to at least finish all the food before me."

"I see." Kino was not especially moved, but replied without a hint of criticism.

"Because of that, I have become so fat since I came here. —What's the secret so that I can stay slim like you, miss traveler?"

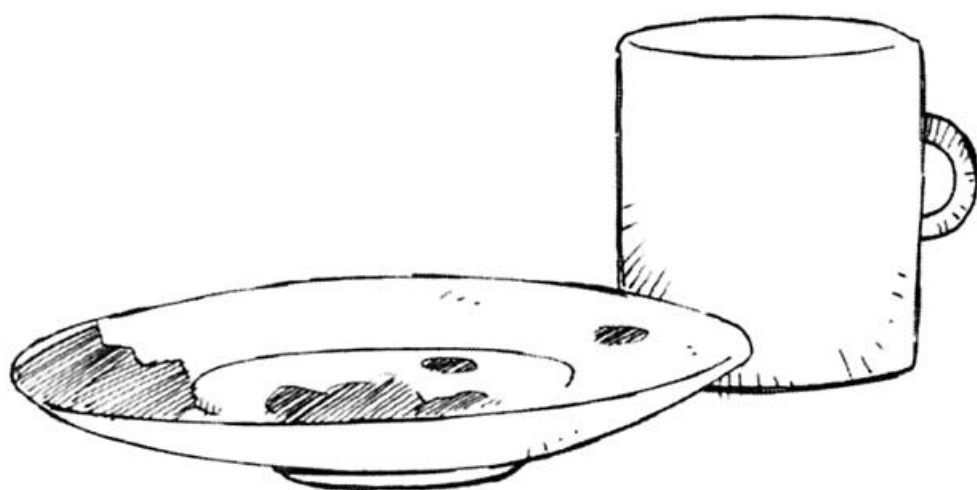
Kino considered the question for a while, and then,

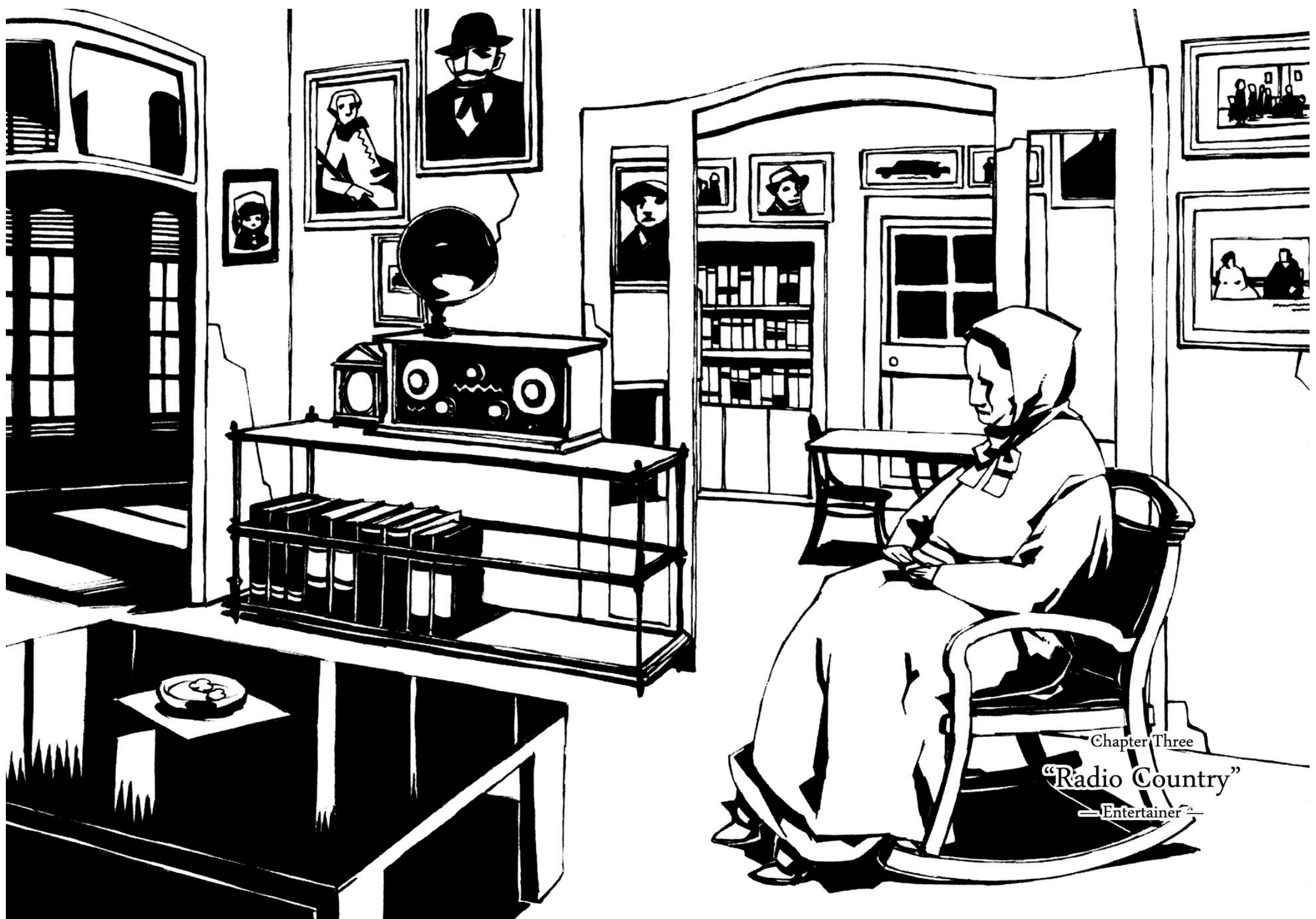
"I suppose you won't get fat if you ride a motorrad the entire day."

—

After they finished their tea, they offered thanks for the meal and stood from the table.

One of them returned to his duties, while the other returned to her travels.





Chapter Three

"Radio Country"

—Entertainer—

“Radio Country” — Entertainer —

[Good evening to everyone listening to our government radio station. Thank you for waiting. It is time for this station’s most popular radio program, brought to you twice a week—“Mr. Scherzi’s Start Now!” Tonight as well, we will be enlightened with various issues that would go unnoticed without Mr. Scherzi’s sharp insight. Our previous week’s broadcast, “Futility of Electricity, Futility of the Mind”, received plenty of reaction through phone calls and letters. Thank you very much. —Now Mr. Scherzi, please be our guide once again.]

[Good evening and thank you.]

[Let’s cut to the chase. Our topic for this evening is ‘traveler’, isn’t it?]

[Yes, ‘traveler’. For tonight, I want to develop my discussion from this.]

[Why is that again?]

[Of course. —Well, I’m sure everyone knows about the traveler who entered our country four days ago, and left just yesterday evening. Some of you may have even seen this traveler in person.]

[This rare visit even made it to the news. It was a traveler called Kino, who came to our country on a motorrad. Apart from the traders flowing into our country, it has been more than five years since a ‘pure’ traveler made their way here.]

[It is likely that among you, there are those who were glad that someone came from a different land to this small, isolated country. And probably, some of you were pleased with the thought that 'we are not alone', and having seen that the traveler had a safe stay and left with a smile, were relieved that you didn't make a blunder during his visit.]

[Ah, it's just as you say. Why, it's been such a long time, after all. I won't go as far as naming them here, but it seems that there were even politicians present in the welcoming party held in the dining hall of a lodging house built from our taxes.]

[Anyway, speaking of carrying out our duty as hosts, I suppose we did a good job. But please hold on. Has everything really ended well? That is our theme this time.]

[You mean to say?]

[I'll go straight to the point and say my conclusion—that traveler is a fake.]

[Eh? He's not a genuine traveler?]

[That's right. There were several 'strange' points that made me adhere to this conclusion. Before the main discussion, I'll raise several examples of these points. First of all—the traveler's age.]

[It was quite a young fellow. Around mid-teens, I say.]

[Exactly. His youth was thoughtlessly and recklessly published in the newspapers as surprising and impressive, but this was the first detail that made me suspicious. For someone that young to go traveling all alone—isn't that beyond common sense? Why is it that no one noticed this fact?]

[Oh, now that you mention it...that is true...]

[Be that as it may in his home country, still, wasn't that an age where he should still be going to school? Moreover, do you think that's a conduct parents would normally approve?]

[Ah, but see here. Wasn't that a case of 'making your beloved child go on a journey'?]

[That was a proverb they used to say a lot in the past, but people has taken it out of context. Those words originated from an era where traveling is the only way for a person to undergo successive hardships. But it actually means roughly the same as 'spare the rod, spoil the child'. Today, having your child travel in lawless regions between countries is taking it to a dangerous extreme. And from that, we can see another point come to surface.]

[Oh, and that is?]

[That is, the contrived nature of such a youth going across lands rife with danger.]

[I see... Well, he was carrying a persuader, though.]

[Indeed he was carrying one. Unless you are some man of legendary strength, there is absolutely no way you could go on a journey without having any weapon. —But if I have to say it, that was a mistake.]

[‘That’, meaning?]

[That hand persuader hanging from his right thigh. I only saw it in photos, but it certainly looked like a six-chambered high-caliber revolver.]

[And how was it a mistake?]

[What I am saying is that it was a persuader that would be impractical for any traveler to have. This will be slightly technical, but let me explain. It was a type of revolver that requires its bullets, gunpowder, and primer to be packaged separately. It’s a rather old kind, different from the ones in general use nowadays, which use bullet cartridges.]

[Oho. And what about this old type?]

[You see for this type, once you’ve fired off all six shots, reloading takes such a tremendous amount of time. Now that there are automatic-type persuaders that can fire twenty or thirty rounds in one load, using that sort is a bit, you know...]

[Figuratively speaking, ‘why use a quill when you can use a fountain pen’, right?]

[Yes, you nailed it. One has to choose a weapon for a journey thoroughly and realistically. Taking such an antique item to deck out oneself is mere self-gratification, a display of artlessness.]

[I see... As usual, your sharp viewpoint enlightens us.]

[But indeed, not one person from this country noticed. But still, saying, 'It's understandable, since not everyone is well-versed when it comes to persuaders,' is a rather shallow excuse, I say. — It's a good example of slacking off and overlooking a fatal mistake.]

[Indeed. So even though he had a weapon, you noticed this one 'odd' detail about it.]

[Yes. —But, it's not just the persuader, that motorrad is strange as well.]

[Oh?]

[It's too big. Both the wheels and the engine. When you are choosing a motorrad, it is typical to pick something that would be suited to your body type. And so, there's no reason for him to choose such a bulky model.]

[I see. Now that you mention it, it really looked unnatural for that traveler.]

[There's more.]

[More?]

[He had a rather neat appearance. It's strange no matter how you look at it. It seems that he was clean enough to not raise any attention while walking around the city. I heard that the guards and the inspectors at the gates were pleased with that.]

[Yes, there were such reports indeed. —But according to the person himself, he cleans up whenever he has the chance.]

[It can't be that simple. What? After camping out in a place without a shower? Don't tell me he had been swimming in a freezing river this late in autumn? Everyone sure was easily fooled.]

[Speaking of travelers, isn't it expected for them to have scruffy beards and be quite dirty?]

[That's too much stereotyping, but still, he's too tidy...]

[I see. The flaws are coming out one after the other. I'm just beginning to see the truth myself.]

[There are various perspectives. However, you should not think that you have seen everything just from a fleeting glance of what's before your eyes. You will only be easily fooled that way. You were intentionally shown only what is right in front of you, but there are a lot of things that people don't want you to see.]

[Indeed, we know that there are a lot of people who can easily be deceived in this country.]

[And just as I have said from the start, that person is a 'pseudo-traveler'—a fake. It's just a person pretending to be an aloof traveler who wandered through the wilderness, alone with his motorrad.]

[Then, Mr. Scherzi, according to your conclusion, what is that traveler's real identity, once and for all?]

[Ok. It's probably a person from a neighboring country. We can't really limit it to the closest countries, but he should be living in a country nearby. Of course, that he continues to travel by himself is a lie. A big fat lie.]

[And so—]

[He must be an extremely immature guy from a well-to-do family. He came to a place somewhere close to this country with a truck or something, taking the motorrad and some attendants with him on a pleasant journey. Of course, they must have paid a good deal for guards. Along the way, he must have had a cook to prepare wonderful meals for him to eat, and clean clothes to change into every day.]

[And then, he disguised himself before he entered the country.]

[Yes. He dressed up 'like' a traveler, piled up some luggage on the motorrad, and in order to convincingly play the role of an achiever, added the persuader. If a veteran traveler were to enter the country, this rustic country's people would be very glad. I am sure he must have thought that he would be able to savor the pleasant feeling of being pampered and being looked at with admiring eyes. There's no doubt that deep inside, he's snickering at the gullibility of our countrymen.]

[That gives him quite a bad character.]

[We were all taken for a ride. Upon leaving the country, he must have been united with his friends. About this time, they're on the way home to their country, laughing their hearts out. It was a mere three-day journey, after all.]

[That may be true. But he did say that he had decided on this as a rule for his journey.]

[I think that the truth is he would have liked to stay as long as he can. But in order to not let his disguise wear off, he lied and made up a traveler-ish 'personal rule' as an escape.]

[I see. There is some truth to that way of thinking.]

[Though in all respects, he was only a cowardly con artist, right about now, he may be announcing to his chums how he was able to completely deceive a whole country. —But now that the truth has been revealed, broadcasted and has become well-known facts, from here on, no matter what he thinks or what he says to anyone, it will only be a proof of his foolishness, nothing but piling shame upon shame.]

[In a way, he's blessed for not knowing it.]

[Well, this may look only like a youth's pranks exposed in broad daylight. However...seeing that his identity went unchallenged and that he was pampered due to our countrymen's naiveté only shows that there is some problem with our people's critical ability and prudence. The main message that I want to impart this time is this: The spreading disease of 'lack of critical thinking' and 'simple-mindedness' in this country.]

['Lack of critical thinking' and 'simple-mindedness', is it?]

[Yes. Those two comprise tonight's theme. Adults of 'good sense' from our country believed this traveler without a second thought. If he were not a mere ill-natured trickster, but was actually a spy sent by an enemy country, what would have happened?]

[That's not a very appealing thought... They would probably think that this country is very submissive.]

[That might be seen as a reason for having a national defense, but it is not necessarily impossible. With that, I want our concerned citizens to seriously reflect about this.]

[Indeed.]

[There are too many gaps in this country. That is, there are too many gaps in its people. I want everyone to know that indifference and innocence are things that at times, can be considered as crimes.]

[The innocence of children is still pleasant, though...]

[About that. Though everybody thinks children are innocent, there are many of them who have composure and are capable of rational judgment. In fact, when my nephew heard the news about a traveler entering the country, it seems that he asked his parents many times over, 'Really? Did a traveler really come?' In other words, the child was able to see through his camouflage. This is quite amazing. A proof that a mere four-year-old child was able to get closer to the truth than the great majority of our citizens.]

[The accuracy and keenness of a child's observation is really shocking at times.]

[Definitely. And when they grow up, that will be reversed, and what will emerge is the carelessness of an adult. It would be great if everyone turns back into children all at once.]

[That's a bold proposal, but if that were to happen at once, this country might fall into ruin.]

[Well, it's ruined enough as it is. This country is already in the process of decay. —Just as I said before, if all the adults here were to die at once, then that will give birth to a country of nothing but children. But once those children become adults, the world at that time will be much more preferable than the one we have right now. I assure you. —But of course, something like that is not possible, so we'll just have to do with the tragedy of a country we have right now.]

[These blunders, or deeply ingrained 'mistakes' of adults—where did they come from?

[That is of course, a problem of the 'mind'. I have been saying it from the beginning, but, right now, the adults don't understand at all what that true 'mind' really is. And they don't try to understand it. They don't notice that they're losing something important. They continue to pretend that they don't notice. And the tragedy goes on. That is the true present condition of this country.]

[I see. It only means that adults no longer have a mind for 'self-criticism'. —It's about time, but let's give way for tonight's conclusion.]

[‘Lack of critical thinking and simple-mindedness’ — If we continue living our lives like this, then we are headed to a mental downfall of this country. I’ve said it many times before, but that day is just right at the corner. People who haven’t realized it yet may be laughing lightheartedly, but for the sake of this country, please realize that that day of despair is about to come.]

[Thank you very much. — Everyone, what do you feel about this? We’ll be awaiting your phone calls or letters for your opinions and requests. See you again next time. Next will be the weather corner.]

—

[Hello. Is it all right to call now?]

[It’s okay.]

[Did you listen to the broadcast just now?]

[Of course. Just as always, that guy did a good job stretching out some obscure theory.]

[It was amazing. Usually, I erase the recording, but I saved it this time. When he talked about ‘minds’ out of the blue, I spewed out the tea I was drinking.]

[I roared out laughing when I heard about his nephew ‘who saw the truth on his own’.]

[Then there was that old ‘waiting for the day of despair’ discussion. He went talking about how he was so smart, being the only one to have noticed it, and all.]

[Yeah. — But they have been saying that non-stop since five years ago. Just when is that day gonna come?]

[They'll keep on saying that until it comes, so someday they'll get it right.]

[Hahaha. That corner is really fun. I want it to go on.]

[You bet. By the way, do you think the traveler was really like that?]

[Traveler? Ah, the traveler that was used as primer for discussion. — Whether it's true or not doesn't really matter anymore.]

— —

"Hello there. Mr. Scherzi, thanks for today's work."

"Yeah."

"Today's show was also quite impressive. About this time, our PR must be getting flooded with phone calls. It will probably surpass the record of our previous installment."

"That's great but...there's some weakness in the evidence, or a hole perhaps. But it's just an opinion, so I guess it doesn't matter."

"Oh? Well let's hear it for now."

"That argument about the persuader. It may be true that his choice of weapon was offhand, but if it's for traveling purposes, then it is reasonable to avoid bringing heavy weapons or those that use too much ammunition. That persuader uses gunpowder that can be bought everywhere and its bullets can be hand-made from molten lead. It is quite convenient in terms of not having to carry too much bullets with him. I believe that traveler knows this very well."

"Your obsession is kicking in again. You really are detailed when it comes to persuaders, Mr. Scherzi."

"There's one more."

"Yes, what is it?"

"There's a hot spring about half a day's travel to the east. That traveler must have camped out there. That was why he was clean. The water and steam there can be used as much as one likes, after all. Geologists know about this, so it would be a better not to mention it too much."

"Okay... For the time being, I'll mention it to our script writer. But you know, almost nobody who listens to us will understand that."

"That may be true, though."

"Well, help us again next time, Mr. Scherzi! Thanks for the good work!"

"Sure. Thank you."

Chapter Four
“A Land Saved”
— Confession —



“A Land Saved” — Confession —

There was once a traveler named Kino. Despite her young age, she was very skillful with persuaders (Note: A gun), and almost no one could surpass her.

Kino’s companion in her travels is a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) called Hermes. Hermes’ rear back seat was converted into a carrier and loaded with lots of luggage on top. Because Kino is a traveler, she goes around visiting various countries.

—



Once, Kino and Hermes arrived in a certain country.

Inside a forest thickly grown with trees that will make your neck hurt if you try to look up at their tops, there was a green wall covered profusely with ivy—it was as if it was deliberately being hidden from view. The season neared the end of spring. It was neither warm nor cold, and a pleasant breeze was blowing.

"It's just as the rumors say, Kino."

"Yeah, if we weren't told about this country, we would never have found it."

—

At the gates, Kino asked for approval to stay for three days. And as she was a rare visitor, she was warmly welcomed and was soon given a permit by the sentry. The gates opened with a clatter.

What was seen upon passing through the gates was the last of the forest, with the scenery suddenly transforming into an open and level land. There was a meandering expanse of fields and pastures, and groups of domestic animals grazing leisurely on the grass. It was a little country with a population comparatively smaller than its vast land, and doesn't seem to have seen much advancement in science. Since it was almost evening, small streams of smoke could be seen rising out from the chimneys of log cabins here and there.

"It seems like a good country," Hermes said. Kino agreed, and then decided to look for an inn.

Kino asked around when they arrived at the center of the country, which had many buildings. But there was nothing like an inn in this country to which almost no traveler ever comes. Out of kindness, they were allowed to borrow one room in the large wooden building that seemed to be the town hall, as it was the gathering place of the residents. Kino was able to sleep under sheets after a long time.

—

The next morning.

"Jeez, so noisy—"

Hermes, who normally wouldn't wake up even if you kick him hard, was roused with a loud noise coming from the streets.

The noise that drifted into the streets from a megaphone tied to a telephone pole was a voice accompanied with a peculiar melody. The voice had an odd accent, with words repeating over and over again like an incantation. It was completely incomprehensible. Even the background music was so bizarre, it would make one wonder what the composer looked like.

Kino, who woke up at dawn as usual, was already finished practicing with her persuader and physical exercises, taking a shower, and eating her breakfast, which was portable rations due to the lack of a cafeteria in this country.

"What a wonderful country. —I didn't have to smack you awake, Hermes."

"This isn't a joke. What in the world is happening here? Ah, there it goes again."

"I'd like to know myself. We've been to many countries before and have seen a lot of things, but it's the first time there's something like this. So, let's go check it out today."

And so Kino and Hermes left the building to go sightseeing.

And immediately, they were surrounded by people.

—

Upon being surrounded by the residents, the first thing that surprised them was the strange bamboo garments that they wore. Everyone was dressed in clothes that Kino had never seen in any country before. But it was unfathomable as to what kind of purpose the person who made it had in mind.

Then they all spoke, asking Kino one after the other whether they performed their religious ceremony well...or not.

"Religious ceremony?"

Kino cocked her head as she did not understand the question's meaning, so the people explained.

What they were performing was a religious ceremony. First, they wanted to ask whether the traveler was a 'believer', as this religion was supposedly widely accepted in many countries, and has a fairly large amount of followers. If it were not the case, as she must have witnessed the ceremony in some other country, they would like her to tell them whether their own version of the ceremony was good. Wouldn't it be too embarrassing to show it to adherents from other countries? Would it make them closer to God? They asked unanimously.

"Kino?" Hermes asked.

"Um—" Kino began. The people paid attention. "It's a pity, but I came from a small country and I didn't know about this ceremony. Moreover, I merely drop by in the countries I visit, so I don't have enough time to get acquainted with their culture. I'm really sorry to let everyone down."

What he was about to say was completely different, so Hermes remained silent.

The strangely-clad residents of the country were fairly disappointed by these words, but they soon pulled themselves together, and said that since it can't be helped, Kino can just get to know the religion in this country.

And so Kino spent the time until lunch hearing from various people about their wonderful religion, its incomprehensible doctrine, and the ceremony, which could only be described by the word 'weird'. Hermes was asleep the whole time.

Kino had to put up with this ordeal, but her mood lightened up when she was invited to a big house to eat lunch along with the other people.

During their after meal tea, one middle-aged woman talked to Kino.

"It's such a relaxing and heart-warming religion, so it was proclaimed official quickly."

"Huh? Since when was it propagated in this country?" Hermes asked.

The answer they gave was unexpected. It appeared that this religion was only spread in this country about ten years ago, and only a lone missionary who happened to arrive in the country did the work. However, it spread throughout the country in no time at all. If he had so wanted, this missionary could have obtained a luxurious life or immense political power. But he was not greedy, and even now, he chose to live in a small house at the edge of the countryside, and lives a quiet life while meeting with his believers from time to time.

"If it were not for that man, I believe this country would have become worthless. No, it may be that this country would have been gone by now," said one man.

"What do you mean?" Kino asked.

The man explained as a representative of the crowd. Ten years ago, this country fell into a so-called 'dark age'. No crop was harvested, animals could not reproduce, bad weather continued on end, a strange ailment befell the people, children did not listen to their elders, so on and so forth.

"That's exaggerated," Hermes blurted out without thinking, but the people were dead serious.

Weariness and despair spread among the people, and just when everybody was on the verge of giving up, he came—a missionary disguised as a worn-out traveler.

'If you can, please do as I say. —You will gain peace in your soul.'

He began to preach with these words. Originally, they had a native religion, but no one had any idea when it started. However, when it did not help them in their hardships, the citizens readily abandoned it and embraced the new faith. They prayed desperately, conducted ceremonies, and implored with all their might.

"And then a miracle occurred."

From then on, the harvest became fruitful, the livestock multiplied, the illness faded away, the weather calmed down, the children listened to their elders. The country was showered with blessings, and each person regained their health, both in mind and body.

"I see," Kino said as she was taking a bite out of her tea cake.

"T-t-t-t-t-t-there's trouble!" A lone man leapt into the room with a pallid face.

"I don't know what happened, but you don't have to be that flustered. God is watching us, you know."

The man was admonished by the others to collect himself. However,

"But! The missionary w-w-w-wanted to m-m-meet with the t-t-t-traveler, just the two of them!"

"What!" "What did you just say?!" "No way!" "Are you kidding?!"

Everyone went in a panic.

—

"It is extremely rare for him to see anyone else other than a representative. This is such an honor, so don't you dare be disrespectful!"

Being told such, Kino and Hermes headed towards the house of the missionary.

They rode around the country, following behind a man's tractor. The people who were doing farm work waved their hands as they passed through the fields and crossed the pastures.

"You just have to go straight through here. I'll be on my way. —I beg you; please do not show him any discourtesy."

Having parted with the guide, Kino and Hermes also went beyond the outskirts of the country, and entered the path towards a reforested area.

Upon doing so, they soon found a small log cabin that stood silently among the trees. As they were informed, it was the missionary's house.

—



As Kino stopped Hermes' engine, a lone man went out of the house.

Dressed in ordinary shirt and pants, it was a middle-aged man with a passive expression. Both his face and body were slim; his face was cleanly shaved and he had no beard.

"... I'm glad you came. I welcome you along with your motorrad."

The man spoke gently to Kino and gestured for her to come. They entered the log cabin, and then she set Hermes beside the table on his center stand.

The man invited Kino to sit down, and sat opposite her. He joined his hands in front of his face. And then, he gave Kino a straight, intense glare.

The first thing the man said was, "Did you tell?"

Neither Kino nor Hermes understood what he meant.

"If you did, I will have all of the citizens go after you, and you will not be able to get out of this country alive," he then said.

This time Kino somehow understood his meaning, and asked, "About what?"

"About that religion I taught them," the man said, and Hermes understood.

"I knew it. You're a fraud." For a moment, the man trembled, surprised with Hermes' blunt words. Hermes was unfazed, and continued, "What you mean to say is, we are not supposed to tell what we have seen or heard."

"I haven't said anything yet. —But, I don't think they would believe what I would say," Kino said.

"But, if you say anything I will kill you. I will never let you out of this country alive. You can count on it."

"I'm not going to tell. Hermes too!"

"My tongue might slip."

"Then I will have to leave you behind —"

"I was lying. I'm not saying anything. I don't have any reason to do so."

The man took one long breath, and grunted,

"I see... Then, it's all right."

—



There was silence for a while.

"Is that all you have to say to us? If so, then we will go back to our sightseeing," Kino said.

The man said yes, and nodded, and Kino stood up from her chair. But soon the man seemed to have changed his mind, and stopped them. He put his joined hands on his forehead.

"It's all...a ridiculous sham... It was just something I said in the spur of the moment; just some random speech I came up with... Ah..."

"..."

The man began his monologue, his head still hung down. Kino silently looked down on him. Just behind her, the motorrad named Hermes asked a question.

"Mister, if you were not a 'missionary', then were you originally a traveler?"

"That's right... I was a traveler, a wanderer... Ten years ago, I arrived in this place, where no one would have thought a country existed."

"What was your reason for lying? Did you intend to deceive them?"

"No... At the beginning I was all alone, and I really needed help. Then on the roadside, I saw a girl all worn-out. I told her,

'If you say this, you'll feel better. It's a prayer from my country.'

"Without giving it a thought, I taught her a charm...something my grandmother used to say to me to cheer me up when I was just a child. I thought it would be nice if that child feels better from it..."

The man's spiel continued. The girl, just as the man had hoped, felt much better upon reciting the words with a strange ring in them; words she had never heard before. Though it was a mere psychological effect, the family of the child made a big deal out of it, and spread rumors. Soon, the poor who were exhausted of their lives began pouring into the same room where Kino and Hermes stayed in the night before, to visit the man.

"If only I stopped that time...if only I told them it was all a lie..."

Furthermore, the man thought of a fitting incantation, as well as a religious ceremony modeled after some callisthenic exercises he had learned back in his childhood.

"That family taught it to their neighbors, and soon it became popular in their whole village."

The fad in this village spread bit by bit to the whole country, and soon, more and more people came to visit the man, seeking to learn about this ceremony.

"I couldn't tell them the truth..."

The man boldly declared to the people who relied on him:

'I will teach everyone about this religion 'xxxx', which has saved a great number of people in my own, and in many other countries!'

With all his might, the man spread to everyone in the country the teachings he came up with, the ceremonies he fabricated one night he couldn't sleep, the religious melody he composed out of thin air, and the festival outfit he happened to see in a country he visited one time.

"... How naïve! How foolish these beings are!"

The man snarled, his hands still fixed on his forehead.

"I see, it was a very interesting story—" Hermes began, "But, what exactly do you intend to accomplish by telling us all this? Do you want Kino to get you out of this country? Do you need help in escaping?"

The man lifted his face to this question. Kino, who had been silent all along, became slightly surprised when she saw the man's face.

"How preposterous!"

So said the man, his face smiling, and his eyes beginning to get blurry with tears. It was a wonderful smile.

"I don't want to leave this country! To leave here you say?!" the man declared as he parted his firmly joined hands and curled them tightly into fists.

"Oh? — But why?"

"That's because—" the man answered with a smile, but was only able to say this much before his words trailed off. He placed his fists on the table.

Before Kino and Hermes who looked on in surprise, tears began to flow down from the man's eyes like waterfalls. The tears streaked down his cheeks and fell to his knees.

"That is... that is... I-It was because... I was saved by this country..." The man said brokenly as he cried.



"I...did not wish to go on a journey... I just couldn't bear to stay in my home country... It's just that...I was born to a family of low social standing... I was abused and scorned my whole life... I couldn't stand it anymore—"

The man raised his fists from the table. He lifted his gaze and spread his arms apart. It was as if he was trying to seize the sky.

"Then, I stumbled upon this country. A country that needed me! A country I was meant to save!"

Neither Kino nor Hermes said anything, and only looked at the man who gazed up at the sky with tears gushing forth from his eyes.

"This is a wonderful country! I was saved by this country!"

—

Soon Kino left the log cabin, pushing Hermes along. The man couldn't see their backs behind his tears, which fell from his eyes like waterfalls.

"Indeed...I don't believe in God or the like... But! But if there really is a God...please let me stay in this country like this. The land that I saved...please do not take it away from me. I just want everything to stay as they are... Oh, God—"

Epilogue
“The Ship Country”
— On the Beach · a —



Epilogue: “The Ship Country” –On the Beach · a

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

I have long, soft, white fur. I look as though I am always smiling, but that doesn't mean I'm always happy. I was just born with this face.

My owner is Master Shizu. He is a young man who is always wearing a green sweater, and he is currently travelling on a buggy after having lost his hometown in complex circumstances.

And I am with Master Shizu.

The buggy carrying Master Shizu and myself was driving along the beach.

The spring air was warm. There was not a single cloud in the air, and the sun shone down from the top of the skies. Everything around us was lush.

To the right of the buggy was a flat plain, covered in thin grass that stretched out towards the horizon. To the left, slightly beyond the beach, was the clear blue ocean, stretching endlessly into the calm horizon.

The buggy drove along a lone path in the plains. The entire car shook when it occasionally hit a bumpy stretch of the road.

In the back of the buggy was Master Shizu's favourite sword, and a large bag. Everything he needed, including changes of clothing and daily necessities, were stored in there. Things like the tent and other camping equipment that he did not need when staying in hotels and the like had been stowed away in a box underneath. On either side of the hood were containers of fuel and drinking water.

Master Shizu was wearing his usual sweater, with a pair of goggles over his eyes. He sat on the driver's seat on the left with his hands on the steering wheel. The path was nearly perfectly straight, with no obstacles along the way. Master Shizu hadn't changed gears once so far. The buggy continued on from morning, along the unchanging landscape.

Suddenly, Master Shizu looked at a meter on the buggy and spoke tersely.

"We're almost there."

He was right. I could see something like a dark speck in front of the horizon ahead of the road.

When we approached closer, I could tell that the speck was a group of people and cars. There were about a dozen large trucks there that had been fitted with gigantic tires to help them drive along rough terrains. Half of them were loaded with mountains of goods covered with a tarp, and the other half had been loaded with fuel.

There were about twenty people there, all men. Other than the few keeping watch from atop the trucks, the men were seated around a table with a parasol. The tents that stood upon the plains were proof that these men had been staying here for several days now.

Master Shizu slowed down the buggy.

"So it was true."

Master Shizu nodded slightly in reply. And he drove the buggy very slowly over to the men so as to not arouse any suspicion.

Master Shizu stopped the buggy in front of the men with persuaders and waved in greeting. He waited until two men holding rifles approached us.

"I am a traveller! I wish to board the the 'Ship Country'!" Master Shizu spoke loudly. The two men approached carefully and looked over us and the buggy. A middle-aged man spoke to Master Shizu.

"I ask you, just as a precaution. What have you heard of us?"

Master Shizu answered honestly.

That he had known of the rumours, but was given more specific information from the people of a southern land by the sea. According to them, a gigantic floating island called the the 'Ship Country' had existed for a very long time on these seas, and that it was possible to cross the great ocean to the west aboard this island, though it would take a long time. A traveller would have to pay for the crossing with some sort of manual labour, but they would be given food and shelter.

And that only way to make this crossing would be to make contact with the merchants who did trade with the 'Ship Country' periodically. Transport ships were regularly dispatched from the country for these trades, and taking this transport would allow Master Shizu to take the buggy onto the 'Ship Country'. This is not a legend--there have been many travellers who had made this crossing.

"All right."

Once they were convinced that Master Shizu was not a bandit out to pilfer their goods, the men lowered their guard. And though he always had his sword at arm's reach, Master Shizu did not seem to be particularly cautious.

Master Shizu parked the buggy near their tents, put his sword on his belt, and disembarked. He then greeted a bearded man, who was the leader of the merchants. This man in his sixties sipped his tea as he asked questions out of the blue.

"That is a fine buggy you have there. How much are you willing to sell for?"

Master Shizu politely turned down the offer.

"That is a fine sword you have there. How much are you willing to sell for?"

"That is a fine dog you have there. How much are you willing to sell for?"

"That is a fine sweater you have there. How much are you willing to sell for?"

"You are quite a fine-looking young man. How much..."

Master Shizu turned down every last one of his offers.

Later.

"I will buy anything you do not need. I am especially willing to pay larger sums for machinery. Well?"

Master Shizu fell into thought for a moment, but he replied that, unfortunately, he had nothing he wanted to sell. Despite the fact that he had a pocket watch he received from another country stowed away inside his bag.

As the people in the southern country advised, Shizu gifted to the merchants several bottles of liquor he had bought there. It wasn't particularly expensive, but a delicacy all the same.

The bearded man laughed.

"Oh! My thanks. Men! A gift! Make sure you show this man your gratitude. Free wine must be repaid in full, after all!"

And once we had established a friendly relationship with the merchants, we began to wait for the transport ships.

The merchants invited Master Shizu to tea.

As usual, Master Shizu took a seat at the table and cautiously asked about the ingredients in the tea. Once he had confirmed it was not poisonous, he began to drink it. The tea was full of sugar and milk. Master Shizu commented that it would be perfect after a tiring day's work.

After tea, the bearded man spoke.

"All we have to do now is wait."

According to him, there were cases when the transport ships did not come. They would occasionally end up going home without a trade because of bad weather or other reasons that stopped the ships. The dates were not set in stone, either, and so these men would spend about fifteen days sitting on the beach. This was probably why they had not unpacked their trucks.

Their country was about a ten-day drive away to the east. Their trade goods included fuel, processed foods, clothing, and crafts. From the 'Ship Country' would come in exchange rare shellfish, dried fish, and other valuables from the other continent. It seemed that these trades had occurred twice a year for the past two centuries.

"You mean that the 'Ship Country' has been moving at a constant speed all this time?"

"Yes. That's why we can't afford to miss it. You're quite fortunate, young man. In any case, what do you plan on doing by crossing over to the western continent? Do you have some business there?"

Master Shizu shook his head and answered that he merely wanted to see new lands. He was lying, of course, but the merchants did not pry.

—

The ships did not arrive that day.

As the bright orange sun disappeared past the horizon, the watchman with the binoculars climbed down from the top of the truck. They said that the ships never came after sunset.

Master Shizu had dinner with the merchants. They gave him food to eat in exchange for the wine. It was a dish of noodles boiled in a large pot, covered in meat and vegetable broth. They even cooled some down for me to eat. It was quite delicious.

The merchants went to bed early, retiring to their tents with the exception of the watchmen.

As usual, Master Shizu placed a board on top of the hood of the buggy and made himself a simple bed on the plains, a short distance from the tents.

The full moon was glowing a pale blue in the sky. There was no sign of rain. It was spring, but the night wind was quite chilly. Master Shizu put a thick blanket over himself.

"I'm counting on you, Riku. Sleep well."

"I understand. Sleep well, Master Shizu."

Once Master Shizu had fallen asleep, I cautiously went to sleep in front of the buggy.

Nothing happened, with the exception of the watchmen changing shifts once in a while.

It was a quiet night filled with the hushed sounds of the waves.

—

The next morning.

The merchants rose early. Master Shizu did the same.

Every person here began moving from the moment the sun rose. They were people accustomed to outdoor life, where not a second of sunlight could be wasted.

As usual, Master Shizu warmed up with light exercises and began training with the sword.

The merchants were either preparing breakfast or keeping watch from atop the trucks. Whether as a hobby or out of necessity, some of the men began fishing.

After eating breakfast, we just waited and waited.

It was a tedious time. Master Shizu sat on the beach and quietly waited with his eyes on the horizon.

Tea and biscuits were served for a simple lunch. and just as they had finished cleaning up after the meal--

"They're here! The ships!" The watchman yelled loudly.

—

The merchants set fire to a stack of firewood they had prepared earlier. There seemed to have been some chemicals mixed in, as the smoke burned a bright orange.

Soon, a trio of strangely-shaped ships made their way to the beach.

They were all the same in appearance, and not all that large--about 50 metres in length. The bridge could be seen in the back. Unlike most ships, the bow was flat, not curved. The ships were coloured a drab grey.

"These are the transport ships." The bearded man declared. Master Shizu asked a question of him.

"How are you going to load your goods? There's not a pier in sight..."

"You'll see. It'll give you something to talk about on your travels."

It was just as the leader had said. As we watched, the transport ships made their way straight towards the beach. The bow beached itself on the sand, and a board fell forward from it to create a bridge. It was a convenient design.

From what I could see of the inside, there was no roof over the hull, but a wide, empty hangar. The three ships made landfall in order.

"Amazing." Master Shizu mumbled. The merchants started their trucks as two people exited from one of the transport ships.

They were wrapped from head to toe in black clothing. From their height and build, they were probably men. They wore long black coats, black pants, black boots, black gloves, black scarves, strange, pointed black hats, and black veils that covered their faces. The backs of their necks were covered by the back of the hat. They did not show any skin whatsoever.

From the bulge at the sides of their coats, I could tell that they probably had persuaders.

"Gloomy as always. These men are the self-proclaimed 'rulers' of the 'Ship Country'.

"'Rulers'?"

"I guess you could say that it's a privileged class. They're the higher-ups--try not to provoke them. I have to work out this trade, so please wait a while."

The leader greeted the two men. They showed each other pieces of paper that looked to be lists, conversed for a short while, and nodded in agreement.

When the leader gave the signal, the trucks drove across the beach and towards the ships. They then backed into the hangars. The merchants unloaded freight in wooden crates, moved the fuel into the transport ship's tanks, and then switched out with another truck. The empty truck then went to another ship to receive its shipment of goods.

In the midst of all this work, the men in black approached us. I couldn't tell what kind of expressions they wore because of the veils. One of them spoke to Master Shizu.

"Thou art the traveller who doth wish to enter Our land?"

It was an extremely archaic style of speech. It seemed like he was purposefully speaking this way--the voice was surprisingly youthful .Maybe this man was quite young.

Master Shizu answered that he was. He asked about the price for ferrying a human, a dog, and a buggy to the western continent.

The price was to work for them(in other words, the rulers) and follow their laws in exchange for food and shelter.

"And what would this 'work' be?"

The men answered that we could either keep watch over the commoners under the commands of the rulers, or do manual labour among the commoners. The latter choice seemed to have been a joke.

Lastly, Master Shizu asked them how long it would take to get across. The man in black replied that it would be about fifteen days. The 'Ship Country' would head north along the continent for about five days, spend another five days crossing a strait, and do business with merchants on the western continent in another five days' time.

"We shall neither force nor reject thee. Make thy decision by the time We leave."

Once the men in black disappeared, Master Shizu fell into thought with his eyes on the ocean. He then looked back at the plains. He looked back at the continent we had crossed. The land where Rafah slept--the land which was once home to Master Shizu's homeland.

Master Shizu then smiled quietly.

"Master Shizu?"

"I've made my decision. I'm a bit worried, but let's make the crossing. Are you all right with this, Riku?" Master Shizu asked.

"You do not need to ask my permission." I replied.

—

"Farewell. May we meet again. I will be more than willing to buy from you."

Master Shizu bid the merchants farewell and drove the buggy. Just as the trucks had, he backed into the hangar from the beach. He parked the buggy beside the piles of wooden crates.

Some people inside the ships were not dressed in black--they were men who didn't wear hats, and were dressed in patchy, thin clothing. It seemed that these were the 'non-ruling class', the commoners.

They did not meet Master Shizu's eyes. They merely secured the buggy with tarps and ropes as the men in black instructed.

"Leave the work to them, traveller, and come this way."

Master Shizu was led by another man in black. He climbed the hangar ladder with me, holding his bag and his sword. He then glanced down at the hangar, as if in realization.

"..."

Master Shizu turned his gaze forward again and followed the man in black. I glanced back at the hangar as well. I could see several crates, separate from the pile, that had been secured behind steel bars.

It was easy to guess what these crates, marked 'Caution: Flammable', and 'Handle with care', could contain. They were most definitely ammunition, bombs, and grenades.

—

Master Shizu was led into a tiny cabin inside the transport ship.

The room was even smaller than those in the cheapest hotels. Paint was peeling off the metal walls, and pipes were sticking out of the ceiling. There was a single round, dirty window, and a bunk bed that resembled a stretcher. There was also a single toilet.

The man in black ordered us to remain here while aboard the ship, told us that we would soon arrive at the country, and locked the door as he left. He did not disarm Master Shizu, however.

The sound of the engines grew louder as the dull vibrations ran up the hull.

The transport ship tilted backwards at a great angle and began to back away. The bow removed itself from the beach and the ship did a 180 towards the sea.

"I see... What next?"

Master Shizu mumbled like someone else's business, looking out the window.

—

The transport ship headed northwest, with regular vibrations and tiny shakes.

Master Shizu sat on the bed with his eyes closed, one hand on the hilt of his sword.

The man in black finally opened the door around the time the sun began leaning to the west. Master Shizu opened his eyes.

"We shall show thee Our country. Bring all thy belongings with thee."

Once again we followed the man in black. We left through a long, narrow hallway, climbed a set of stairs at the end, and came up to the starboard deck.

We were in the middle of the sea. There was no land visible over any of the horizon. A pair of transport ships followed in single file. The salty ocean air was comforting.

"The land shall soon be visible." the man in black declared, and pointed ahead.

At first, it was a black speck--it then became a fist-sized shape.

As we got closer and closer, the country (or more accurately, the walls surrounding the country) rose up from the horizon--we had seen such sights many times, but never over the ocean.

"There lies Our land. We shall introduce Thee to Our comrades upon entry."

As the man in black spoke, the 'Ship Country' displayed its full majesty in front of the transport ships.

It was hard to think of a proper comparison, but it was about three kilometres in diameter and was a long, narrow rectangle. From the centre of the land stuck out something that looked like a tower. Just in appearance it seemed to be a common, small country.

The land was floating on the sea. Though 'Ship Country' was not an official name, it would likely be better described 'The Floating Land'.

"This is interesting. I've never seen a country like this before."

Master Shizu expressed his astonishment.

Lights blinked on and off at the top of the walls. It was a signal. It seemed that the ships had sent a signal back, as the lights on the wall blinked again.

Soon, our transport ship approached a hole in the high walls. A gate opened and an empty black space opened up.

The transport ship entered the country as if into the belly of a beast.

—

The gate shut after the final ship made its way into the ship.

It was only after the gate shut completely and we were immersed in total darkness that the lights came on. It was a long, narrow dock of sorts. It was a space full of metal boards, machinery, and the smell of steam and oil.

Our vantage point slowly became lower and lower. Master Shizu explained that they were draining the water. Soon the transport ship landed on the ship's metal floor.

The man instructed Master Shizu to move the buggy. We went onto the dock in the buggy. We climbed a ramp ahead of us and went through a door as the man in black commanded. Inside was pitch-black, but the ceiling lights soon came on.

It was an extremely large space that could probably house about a hundred cars. It was completely empty save for some rusted scraps of metal in the corner. It was probably an unused storage room of sorts.

"Park where thy heart pleases. It is thy responsibility to drive it back upon departure." the man in black said. Master Shizu parked a distance away from the pile of scraps. He unplugged the battery, secured the buggy to the floor with ropes, and covered the driver's seat with a waterproof sheet.

"May we meet again." Master Shizu whispered quietly to the buggy, and left the deserted storehouse. I followed after him.

We walked through a long hallway, along with five men in black--three ahead of us, and two behind. They surrounded us as if in capture, but they still did not disarm Master Shizu. Light-emitting diodes shone dully on the grey walls and floors. The halls continued in a straight line towards the centre of the country, with no crossings along the way.

At the end of the hall was a large elevator. We took it up to a higher location--from its location, it was likely the tower at the centre.

We stepped off the elevator after quite a long wait. A guard holding a pump-action shrapnel persuader was standing in front of the door. Inside the door was a large, round room.

It was a room about 40 metres in diameter, almost at the very top of the tower. It was centred around the elevator shaft.

All 360 degrees of the walls were glass windows, and outside was the ocean and the clear blue sky. The interior was also covered in metal and plumbing. It seemed that there had been wallpaper and ornamentation on the walls before, but they were no longer present.

There were chairs arranged in a semicircle in the room, and there were ten people sitting in visible range. The chairs seemed to be rotating, as they were all facing this direction.

Everyone was covered in black clothing, but from their builds, there seemed to be women and children there as well. I could sense movements from places out of sight. Overall it seemed there were about thirty people in the room. I could see empty seats, likely because their numbers were not enough to fill them all. Normally, aristocrats and royalty tend to be rather large and plump because of their diet, but it was strange to see that there were no such people here.

There was a single chair with longer legs and thicker armrests. It was probably the 'Captain's seat'. The one sitting there was a slightly smaller person, also dressed entirely in black. It seemed this person was likely an elder.

We were soon led to the Captain's seat. Master Shizu sat on a chair, and I on the floor beside him.

"Welcome, traveller. First, listen to Our words."

The 'Captain' spoke. It was the voice of a feeble old man.

The captain continued to speak until the sun began to set and glow orange. To summarize the his words full of self-praise and pride:

The origins of this country are unknown. They had always lived there for as long as they could remember. The records they had dated back about six hundred years.

The rulers were called by the tasteless name of 'People of the Tower'. They had been ruling this country as its 'Royalty' for a very long time. Their residence was this tower, which constituted as their 'Palace'. They held absolute power over the country and did business with people on the land via the transport ships.

The common people lived on the lands, not the tower. They were divided in tribes according to blood relations and living areas.

Currently, the people in black numbered about fifty, and the commoners about 3000. It seemed to be a relatively small number for a country of this size, and our hunch was confirmed when we were told that the population was decreasing every year.

This country travelled across the ocean seasonally, according to the tides. It seemed that there were some steering devices, but they did not use them unless there were obstacles in their path.

They traditionally welcomed travellers crossing the sea and gave them work. Their work involved keeping peace under the commands of the rulers. In other words, as police or mercenaries.

"If necessary, thou may exert a certain degree of force. They have been troubling Us more and more recently under the pretence of appeals."

It might not have been a good idea for them to say such a thing, at least to Master Shizu.

Once he finally received a chance to speak, Master Shizu told them that he wanted to do manual labour alongside the commoners.

The people in black were surprised, but Master Shizu continued politely.

"It is fitting work for someone so lowly as myself."

Is that supposed to be a joke, Master Shizu?

Not understanding the irony of the situation, the people in black reluctantly agreed to Master Shizu's request.

—

We were led to the first floor by the men in black.

As we went past a set of extremely heavy-looking doors at the end of the hall, we could see the inside of the country's walls and the sight of the land.

If this were a normal country, we could have seen roads, buildings, and the greenery of parks. This was, however, far from normal. Our eyes were greeted by the sight of black, metallic puzzle pieces.

It looked like a factory that produced unknown creations, or perhaps a junkyard. The floors were woven out of metal frames, and there were pipes of all sizes weaving in and out together and stretching out endlessly. We could see no houses.

"The commoners live underneath." said the man in black. Master Shizu nodded in acknowledgement.

It seemed that the sight before us was the remnants of machinery and structures from times long past. It seemed that there were structures above here as well. However, now it was just an empty deck, relentlessly assaulted by the sun's rays that kept the people down below.

"This is a writ of permission. Even the most foolish of commoners will understand that thou art a traveller and Our guest. Stay wherever thou dost wish. Thou mayest come to us anytime thou dost change thy mind. We shall call to thee once the western continent comes within sight." the man in black said as he handed Master Shizu a metal plate the size of a small pocketbook. He opened the door and returned to the tower.

"Hmm..."

Master Shizu put the plate in the back pocket of his jeans and began to walk, holding his bag. He chose his steps carefully as he walked across the deck, coincidentally directing himself towards the setting sun.

"This is interesting." Master Shizu commented as he walked. I soon realized what he meant.

Though the floor was made with flat sheets of metal, Master Shizu's shadow was slowly drifting to the side. Though we couldn't feel it, the country was moving.

After a long walk, we saw stairs leading downstairs.

"I am a traveller. We have entered this country in order to cross over to the western continent. I have decided to live and work among you, and I ask that you provide for me a work and a place to stay."

The commoners greeted Master Shizu with surprise.

We were currently in their residential area, under the deck.

Belowdecks was a large, multi-level residential area. Like the hallways, it was also covered in sheet metal and piping. The snaking hallways twisted and turned, and disorderly stairways created multiple landings.

We would often see the slums of poor countries during our travels, but this place was in even more disarray. It almost looked like a cavern made of metal.

The colour of the metal was all black, just like the colour of the deck. It seemed there was some sort of special coating over it, as no rust was visible. Dim, white lights hung from overhead.

And it was in this space that we saw people like those on the transport ship--dressed in patchy clothing.

We had to make thirty-four right turns, twenty-nine left turns, and climb up and down six and a half staircases under the curious gaze of the residents (men, women, and children) in order to reach the 'room' of the Elder. It seemed that the concept of a 'house' was foreign to them.

It seemed that the Elder's room was the biggest in the vicinity. Of course, it was still so small that myself, Master Shizu, the Elder, and four others were enough to completely fill the room. Those who could not step inside poked their heads in from the entrance. The reason these rooms were so tiny, in spite of the great landmass(if it could be called that) was likely because the living spaces were made of metal and pipes and thus difficult to expand.

"Welcome."

The white-haired-white-bearded Elder greeted us. He looked to be well over eighty years of age, but Master Shizu and I were shocked to learn that he was the eldest in this tribe and was at the ripe old age of fifty-five.

The Elder welcomed us, and asked us to stay here without having to do manual labour. We couldn't tell if he knew about our situation.

Master Shizu explained that he would like fifteen days' worth of food and lodgings, and insisted that he work with them in payment.

I thought there might be some disagreements, but night soon fell and their day came to an end. The discussion was postponed to the next day, as they had to cut the power. Because dinnertime was already over, we decided to sate our hunger with portable rations and allowed ourselves to be led to our quarters. The Elder ordered a man to be our guide--he looked to be in his fifties, but he was actually thirty-five years old.

"This room is excellent. Please show the Elder my gratitude." Master Shizu told the man.

The room was at least larger than the one on the transport ship. Though the metal walls, pipes, and the flimsy-looking bunk bed were the same, there were some blankets there. At the end of the hall outside the room was a communal bathroom.

The plumbing was reasonable yet simple. Water trickled down from a large metal water tank at the side of the ceiling. The water was distilled rainwater, but it was not undrinkable.

The lights soon turned off, and the room was overtaken by blackness. It was pitch dark, like the inside of a cave. I couldn't hear anything from outside, perhaps because surrounding rooms were empty.

"Well..."

Master Shizu took out a small flashlight in order to get his portable rations out of the bag. There was light for a moment, but it quickly disappeared.

After eating the tasteless but nutritious rations, Master Shizu and I quietly conversed in the dark. Of course, there was no one around to hear even if we were to speak loudly.

"Pretty good so far. It's a nice, quiet room."

"I'm glad it's springtime, Master Shizu. It would have been very difficult if we were to cross a cold or hot location during winter or summer."

"Yes... It must be a rough, living here. Of course, I guess it's just a fact of life for these people."

"It seems the next fifteen days will be a valuable experience."

"I don't know if fifteen days is long or short. Anyway, I'm going to sleep now. Good night, Riku."

"Sleep well, Master Shizu."

The first day drew to a close.

—

The next morning.

As we expected, the people of this country were early to rise. Master Shizu and I awoke at dawn as a force of habit. Lights soon came on in the rooms and hallways, and someone knocked on the door.

We followed the same man from yesterday as he led us to breakfast. The paths felt no less complex than yesterday. I felt like we would get lost if we did not remain sharp. Master Shizu was, as usual, wearing his green sweater--but it seemed to be a bit hot for him in this sweltering, crowded place.

He left his sword inside his bag. After all, it would be impractical to carry it around all the time, and it was only the people in black who carried persuaders.

We soon entered a large room, about the size of a school gymnasium. It was quite bright thanks to the light of dawn shining through between the pipes on the ceiling. They told us that they left the metal plate on the deck open on days without rain.

The room was full of people--I almost wondered where they could have all been hiding. There was steam escaping from the next room, which was likely a kitchen. People lined up there, received their plates of food and utensils, and sat on the floor to eat. There were thin cushions for seating, but no tables of any sort. Several children went around with cups and kettles, handing out tea.

All eyes were on Master Shizu as he stepped into the dining hall. The Elder, who had been sitting in the corner, called him over. Master Shizu took care to not bump into anyone who was eating, and walked over to the Elder and his attendants.

Master Shizu exchanged greetings with the Elder. The Elder introduced Master Shizu and myself to the people in the room. People politely greeted Master Shizu.

One person brought plates of food and tea for me and Master Shizu. Although I was quite happy that we did not have to line up, Master Shizu would probably start insisting, from tomorrow on, that he also line up for his food.

"I hope this will be to your liking."

On the plate was a fish. A single fish that had been steamed whole. It had been sprinkled with salt.

Master Shizu, who was never a picky eater, ate it agreeably. I ate as well--it was quite delicious, but this was all that was served for breakfast.

According to the Elder, their meals were almost always fish. Normally they would serve them steamed, fried, or marinated. On occasion they would catch large fish that they would eat raw. Otherwise, their diet consisted of seaweed, shellfish, and the occasional sea animal.

"..."

Master Shizu was about to say something, but went quiet.

The conversation then went to the topic of work. In other words, it was a continuation of last night's conversation. Master Shizu finally managed to convince them to provide him with food and shelter in exchange for his labour.

"All the other travellers who had boarded this land for the crossing had become watchmen on behalf of the People of the Tower... We are moved by your kindness, Master Shizu."

The other people expressed their agreement with the Elder. Everyone thanked Master Shizu for his kindness, but I kept quiet. I knew that it was actually because Master Shizu had to keep up his training, as opposed to being stuck in one place for fifteen days straight.

—

"Well now, Master Shizu. Let me introduce you to your guide. You can ask her anything you'd like to know as long as you're in this country." said the Elder. He then called for 'Ti' to be brought over.

Soon, a little girl came from amidst the crowds.

She seemed to be about twelve years of age. Would they actually tell us something like, "actually, she's four years old", like they did yesterday? She seemed to be about the same height as a girl of that age. Her hair, cut quite short for a girl, was white as snow. The people of this country all had brown or black hair. The Elder was the only exception, and he had a head full of white. Would they actually tell us something like, "actually, she's eighty years old"?

Her eyes were a clear emerald green. I hadn't seen anyone with such an eye colour here so far. She had a stony face--she was more stoic than expressionless. There was not a hint of girlish innocence on her face.

Just like the other people of this country, her clothes had been patched over here and there. She wore grey shorts that showed off her stick-thin legs, and she wore a long brown shirt with a circular cut. I couldn't tell if it had been that colour to begin with or if it had just gotten dirty. On her back was a large pocket, and there were protective pads on her elbows, presumably to prevent her from getting hurt while walking through the narrow halls. There were thick cushions over her knees as well. On her feet were a pair of rubber shoes. She didn't seem to be wearing socks.

The girl bowed lightly to the Elder and stood beside him.

"Master Shizu, this girl is called Tifana. She will be your guide in this country. Please, call her Ti." said the Elder. He then looked over at Ti.

"This man is Master Shizu, a traveller and our guest. Guide him well."

Ti nodded lightly and stared at Master Shizu.

"Nice to meet you, Ti." said Master Shizu.

"..."

Ti stared at Master Shizu without a word. Maybe she was just looking at him, not staring.



After several seconds of silence, the Elder chimed in.

"As you can see, she is a very quiet girl. She almost never speaks. I hope you will get along."

Though I was very curious as to why they sent such a quiet person to be our guide, Master Shizu nodded without resistance.

"Understood."

—

First, Master Shizu and I returned to our assigned room. Ti, our guide, followed us without a word. Master Shizu spoke to her in greeting several times, but the response was always this.

"..."

I don't know about Master Shizu, but I was somewhat flustered. I could not tell what this girl was thinking. However, she would still react in agreement with a nod, and would shake her head in disagreement.

Even when I spoke to her just to see if she would respond, Ti said nothing and merely looked at me.

"..."

I almost felt like there were no emotions in her green eyes. Of course, this was still preferable to her saying, "What a cute doggy!" and hugging and petting me.

When Master Shizu returned to the room, he took off his sweater and put on a green parka over his T-shirt, closing the buttons.

"What now?"

Master Shizu asked Ti.

"..."

It was a less than informative response.

However, Master Shizu did not seem to be particularly upset about this.

"If there's something I can do, I'd like you to take me there. If not, could you show me around this location as permitted?"

Ti then began to walk. Master Shizu asked, "Do you want us to follow you?"

Ti nodded.

—

We followed Ti and looked around the living spaces of this tribe. There were some places with many rooms, likely a densely populated area. It seemed that Master Shizu's room, a distance away, was reserved for guests.

After climbing and descending multiple flights of stairs, we finally arrived at the facility where they caught the all-important fish. It looked like a giant swimming pool--the floor had been cut away to reveal a chunk of ocean. They would lower nets and fishing rods there to catch fish. We were told that they would raise fish in a nearby aquarium if possible. It seemed that there were several more facilities like this in this country,

There was a room for energy control. Under the tower at the centre of the country was an energy source that was overseen by the ruling class, and that is where they supplied electricity and heat. Those who worked in the control rooms were representatives from each tribe. Occasionally, one of the men in black, armed with a persuader, would come in to check that things were running efficiently.

There were other rooms, like a classroom for teaching children, a room for playing some sort of ball game I had never seen before, and a room for housing the sick and injured.

"I see. I understand that the people here are living to the best of their abilities here. Is that all you wanted to show us?" Master Shizu asked Ti.

"..."

The answer was silence.

As a side note, all of the explanations were provided by the people we met in the various rooms. Ti would just wait for us in silence and then take us to the next room once we had been given the information. It seemed that the people knew this--none of them would speak to Ti. Not only that, it seemed none of them wanted to have anything to do with her.

"..."

Ti started walking again with her mouth firmly shut. She led us to the dining hall. We could tell by the fact that they were serving food in the kitchen that it was already lunchtime.

Master Shizu took a seat on the floor with a plate of well-fried fish. Ti sat beside him and stoically began eating her lunch.

"Thank you for showing us around." said Master Shizu. Ti's hand, still holding the fork, froze halfway to the plate.

"..."

She looked up and stared at Master Shizu for a moment before returning to her meal.

—

"Can I look around somewhere or do some work in the afternoon?" Master Shizu asked Ti after lunch. She just shook her head.

"Then you mean I can take a break?"

Ti nodded. Master Shizu was quite the expert when it came to speaking with Ti. He asked her about places we were forbidden to enter and things that we should not do. He asked many questions and got yes-or-no answers from her.

Although I suggested that we ask another person for quicker answers, Master Shizu shook his head.

"It's fine. We have a lot of time anyway."

As a result of conversing(?) until everyone else had left the dining hall, we found out that there were four tribes in this country, including the one we were currently staying with. Each of them held possession of one quarter of this country's (underground) land. We also found out that it was best to stay away from places occupied by other tribes without permission. The basic rule was that the tribes did not associate with one another except during the Elders' council. In other words, the tribes were on bad terms with one another. However, there were rare instances of arranged marriages between the tribes.

Master Shizu sometimes asked Ti about herself. However, he stopped when she shook her head to the question, "What about your parents?".

Master Shizu told Ti that she could go back to her room now, as we did not need a guide for now. However, Ti did not leave. She followed us to our room, sat on the chair, and just stared at Master Shizu.

"..."

I wondered if she was both a guide and a spy, but Ti herself said nothing.

Master Shizu was also silent as he polished his katana and repacked his luggage. He then left to take a shower. I had to watch over Ti, as she tried to follow him in.

We were called to dinner, and we had a meal of fish before returning to our room.

"..."

Once it was time for the lights to go out, Ti wordlessly left the room.

The second day came to a close.

—

"Things might be more tedious than I thought..." Master Shizu muttered in passing. His guess was entirely accurate.

There was almost nothing for Master Shizu to do on the third and fourth days. Though he insisted that they give him work, the people did not let him. They told us that the country was heading north along the continent, and that they would catch hardly any fish during this stretch of the journey.

There wasn't much for an outsider to do in this cramped living space. The people were kind, but none of them particularly wanted to get close to Master Shizu, let him lend a hand with work, or listen enthusiastically to the stories of his travels.

We could do nothing for these two days but eat our meals.

"..."

We repeated going back and forth between our room and the dining hall with the silent, white-haired Ti.

"I'm going to get out of shape at this rate." Master Shizu would say occasionally, and he did chin-ups on some of the pipes on the ceiling or practice swinging his katana in the cramped space.

"..."

Ti just watched Master Shizu without a word.

—

On the fifth morning, we were in the dining hall when we heard the voice of a man in black. It seemed that there was a speaker somewhere.

[Each tribe shall send three men for a day's worth of labour. Thou shalt not send any man who has been sent before.]

That was it. The Elder soon called the names of three men.

We could guess that these were orders for them to work on the transport ships. The country was doing one more trade with this continent. It seemed they were moving according to schedule.

Master Shizu volunteered for the job to take a break and get some exercise, but he was turned down.

"Another free day." Master Shizu complained.

"..."

Ti said nothing.

—

At dinnertime, the men who had come back from work said that a traveller had boarded at the continent.

They said that the traveller was headed for the western continent, just like Master Shizu, and that this person had chosen to stay as a guest of the People of the Tower like many other travellers had before. The people began to worry that the traveller would start to unleash undeserved violence upon them as a guard.

"I suppose that's what most people would have chosen." Master Shizu said. However, he didn't seem to regret his own choice. At least if the traveller came to bother the people, Master Shizu might be able to get some exercise and kill some time.

"What choice you make depends on who you are." said Master Shizu.

"..."

And Ti said nothing. She was like thin air. Both Master Shizu and I slowly stopped concerning ourselves with her presence.

—

It was evening.

It was near the end of the day when I spoke to Master Shizu.

"Perhaps working for the People of the Tower will be less tedious."

"Maybe so. But it's not like I dislike being here. Maybe working for the rulers might not be so exciting, either."

"I see. Then you only have ten days to wait."

"And I won't be making a fuss during that time. Let's try not to run into the traveller who boarded today." said Master Shizu. He then changed the subject.

It was almost time for the lights to go out. The fifth day came to a peaceful close, just as the past four days had been.

"Sleep well, Riku."

"Good night, Master Shizu."

"..."

What was Ti doing here?

The lights then went out. Master Shizu turned on his flashlight. Ti was just sitting on the chair as if she was a piece of furniture. Now that I thought about it, we never saw her leave the room.

If Ti were an assassin, neither myself nor Master Shizu would still be of this world.

"Well... that was a surprise." Master Shizu muttered. He asked Ti if she could make her way back on her own. She shook her head.

"..."

Master Shizu fell into thought.

"..."

Ti stared at Master Shizu as if nothing had ever happened.

Master Shizu soon sighed and smiled.

"Do you want the top bunk, or the bottom bunk?"

Ti pointed to the top bunk. She stood from her seat and climbed the ladder. She immediately got into bed, pulled the blanket over herself, and fell asleep.

"She's asleep. I'm counting on you, Riku." said Master Shizu. He turned off the flashlight and went back to bed. He then fell asleep as if nothing had happened.

I kept an eye out to see if Ti would do anything while we slept, but she didn't even try to leave her bed. A strange night passed.

—

It was the sixth day since we boarded this land.

We were in the midst of eating our steamed fish breakfast with Ti when Master Shizu noticed something out of place.

"It's shaking..."

Up until now, there had been no shaking of any sort. I almost could not believe that this country was floating on water. It was as if I was just walking on solid ground.

However, things were different today. I could feel huge but slow tremors occurring repeatedly over a period of time. The broth of the steamed fish splashed. Things like this were very hard to ignore once you've noticed it.

"I can feel the land shaking. Is this normal?" Master Shizu asked a middle-aged(in appearance) lady who had been eating near us.

Though the woman was surprised that she had been spoken to, she answered our question patiently.

"This shaking is nothing. Please don't worry, Master Shizu. This is nothing to be scared of."

"I see. Thank you."

Master Shizu did not pry any further, as he did not consider this a danger as long as the people of the land thought it safe. I thought the same.

After breakfast, Master Shizu went around like an unemployed man, asking around for work. However, he was turned down every time. Even though it seemed that the men were going off in groups to catch fish.

"At least they could let me do the dishes." Master Shizu complained as he went back to the room. I quietly followed at his side. Ti also followed us without a word.

Back the the room, Master Shizu took a seat on his bed. However, just as another long stretch of boredom was about to begin--

We heard an eerie noise.

"What's that?"

Master Shizu raised his head. It was a dull, cacophonous scream of sorts. It was the sound of metal and the friction between some extremely heavy objects. The sound echoed throughout the room--not from one location, but from all around. As if it was surrounding the area around the room. Two repetitions. Another repetition followed several seconds later.

"It's stopped." Master Shizu said as he looked at Ti. There was no change in her expression.

"I'm guessing this happens often?"

Ti nodded. We were certain that this noise did not bother her one bit.

"I didn't hear anything like this up until just yesterday. they said that we're floating along the ocean currents from today on, right?"

She nodded.

"Then, does this usually happen while the land's riding the currents?"

She nodded again. Master Shizu frowned with a worrisome expression.

"Master Shizu?"

"I've heard a noise very similar to this once before, Riku."

I was taken by surprise and asked him when he had heard such a thing.

"I was at a certain country. We were in an old building that had been damaged in an assault. It was much smaller, but I heard something similar to this. I was wondering what it could be, when everyone told me to get outside. So I did."

"And then what happened?"

"Once we'd all left the building..."

—

Master Shizu and I walked, following Ti.

It would be more accurate to say, however, that we climbed, descended, and generally 'moved forward' through places filled with too many pipes to be used for residential purposes.

Ti used her small frame and knowledge of the location to her advantage and made her way through without a problem. Sometimes, there were places my legs would not reach. I am sorry to say that Master Shizu had to lift me up in such cases.

And finally.

"Again..."

Master Shizu had detected the noise. The sound echoed again.

We still could not tell where the sound was coming from. In other words, it was coming from everywhere. It was as if we were surrounded on all sides by speakers.

Master Shizu placed his face right by a metal pipe as he put a finger to it.

"I knew it."

I could tell what he meant without even having to listen. The pipe was vibrating ever-so-slightly.

Before we had left the room, Master Shizu told me this.

"Once we'd all left the building, the building collapsed. This structure was dozens of storeys high, but it just fell. That screaming sound was the noise of the metal framing bending and skidding against other metals. The man who yelled for us to get out was a former engineer. That's why he knew--a fire had weakened the frame. In other words... I have a very bad feeling about this place."

And now--

"Ti, are there any places around here that are collapsed or broken? Could you lead me to those places?"

"..."

Ti stared at Master Shizu and fell into thought. Several seconds later, she nodded and led the way. This was how we came to start traversing these unwalkable corridors.

—

We walked through an uninhabited area for some time. The paths were so twisted that I couldn't figure out which direction we were heading in. If not for Ti, even I would be lost.

We finally arrived at the entrance to the wreck.

Until just now, our path was at least possible for a person to travel through. However, the sight before our eyes was, in a word, a mess. The room was the size of the dining hall, but it was filled with crushed metals. In the tiny spaces that could perhaps fit a mouse shone little diodes shining dimly.

"I see... but it seems like this place has been wrecked for a long time now."

Master Shizu took hold of a railing in order to go down the stairs. It seemed he wanted to go take a look at the wreckage himself. However--

"Huh?"

Ti pulled at Master Shizu's sleeve.

"..."

Master Shizu looked at Ti in shock. Ti held onto the sleeve of his parka, looking up at him and shaking her head.

"You mean I shouldn't go?"

"..."

She nodded.

"I understand. Thank you."

Master Shizu took his hand off the railing. Ti also let go of his sleeve.

"How is this country--no, ship--constructed? Any ideas, Riku?"

I shook my head. As long as we were on the ocean, this land was a ship--but I couldn't figure out anything further. Master Shizu turned to Ti for help. When he asked her if there was anything she knew, Ti fell into thought.

"..."

Master Shizu continued.

"Anything will do. Maybe an old floor plan, history books, or monuments..."

Ti nodded.

She then led the way out. We followed her. We climbed a steep staircase and found ourselves on the deck, sky in view.

"...."

Our first view of the sky in days was that of low, fast-moving grey clouds. The weather was terrible. We could not see the sun at all, and it seemed like we would be pelted with rain any minute.

There was a strong breeze. A powerful wind blew past, even in this area surrounded by the castle walls. If the noise we heard inside the ship was the cry of a gigantic beast, this was its rough breathing. Ti's white hair and Master Shizu's parka fluttered in the wind.

"From the look of the sky, I'd say the seas are in an even worse state. Especially considering that we're in the open ocean."

I expressed my agreement at Master Shizu's comment. The walls were likely being battered with waves over ten metres high.

"The sheer size of the country is probably what's limiting the shock we receive here."

Master Shizu agreed. When he asked Ti if we were almost there, she nodded and began walking. Master Shizu and I followed after her.

Ti crossed from one metal plate to another. Ahead of us was the long, thin tower.

The sheer presence of the tower was overwhelming. The clouds layered behind it would occasionally flash. It seemed there was a thunderstorm brewing above.

Though we expected Ti to go to the tower, she surprised us by turning to a set of stairs leading down. Master Shizu and I followed her and again entered the structure.

"What is this..."

Master Shizu stood in place, shocked. We were walking through a place only slightly below the deck, but in front of us was the surface of the water. A place that should have been a residential area had been filled with sea water.

"It's been flooded... Right, Ti?"

Ti nodded and continued walking.

"If this is happening everywhere..."

Master Shizu muttered. I followed behind and continued his sentence.

"Then this land may sink, correct?"

"I can't be sure yet, but..."

Ti finally passed through the flooded area and stopped in front of a certain door.

"..."

She pointed at it without a word.

"You want us to go in, right?"

Ti nodded, and Master Shizu slowly opened the door. It ground against the ceiling and squeaked open, making just enough room for a person to squeeze through. First, Master Shizu made sure with Ti that it was safe to go inside. He then stepped in.

The room was about ten metres in diameter. If this area had been occupied, this room would likely have been chosen for use by the Elder. The lights were all hanging at regular intervals across the ceiling.

Ti suddenly pointed at a metal plate stuck on the wall. It was about the size of a blackboard used in a classroom. Although it looked black, it was actually dark maroon--and there were faint but intricate white lines engraved upon it.

"This is a structural drawing of this country. It's very old." said Master Shizu as he thanked Ti.

I took a good look at the plate. The drawing showed a top-down view of the country, a side-view, and a basic floor plan.

The top-down view reflected what this country had been long ago. Walls surrounding the deck in a circle, and buildings built around the tower. The roads stretched out from the centre like the spokes of a wheel. There was a parkland near the central area, and a residential area.

It was a typical city plan. As we expected, there were many buildings and grounding on the deck a very long time ago. The tower in the centre looked much lower than it did now.

The side-view was a cross-section of the country from the centre. The deck was consistent with the top-down view, with residential areas and buildings, but belowdecks was what interested us.

"I can't believe it's so thin."

Master Shizu exclaimed. It seemed we were looking at the same thing.

The lower deck on the cross-section was extremely thin. Until now, we had thought it might be like an iceberg, with a great deal of mass underwater. However, it was the opposite. This country was based on a large, thin plate. On the extremely thin belowdecks area.

From the cross-section, we could see that the belowdecks area was basically a flat wooden crate made out of thin boards connected with short connectors. The flat surface that this supported, in other words, what used to be the land, was the current residential area of this country. It was likely originally a catacomb of maintenance passages for electricity and water supplies.

Once he had looked over the entire map, Master Shizu brought Ti over to the drawing.

"Can you tell me where my room is?"

Ti pointed to a place on the map very far removed from where we were looking.

"That's impressive. Thank you. Could you tell me where we are right now?"

Ti next pointed towards a place very close to the tower. As it was more than a quarter of the land's distance from our room, this place might have been the territory of another tribe. They likely wouldn't welcome us with open arms.

"Then..."

Master Shizu continued calmly.

"If you can, could you point out places like the ones we visited before? Places that have been flooded or wrecked. You just have to point out the ones you know. Can you do it?"

"..."

Ti nodded. She held out her index finger and slowly raised her right arm.

—

"..."

"..."

It was not Ti, but myself and Master Shizu who had been rendered silent.

After pointing out a dangerous place, Ti stopped her finger there for about three seconds before moving to the next spot. Then to the next.

If I counted right, Ti had pointed to 143 places. And these locations were spread out around the entire country. If Ti's indications were not a lie, her memory far exceeded that of an ordinary person. As she pointed out these locations, we heard the noise three times more.

Ti's finger finally stopped.

"..."

She lowered her right arm and looked back at us.

"Oh, I see... Thank you."

Master Shizu thanked Ti first and told her she could take a break. He then stared at the map and asked me a question.

"What do you think, Riku?"

"Likely what you are thinking, Master Shizu. This country--no, this ship--has been moving for six hundred years without having been repaired once. Therefore..."

"At this point, this country won't last much longer. It's going to end up collapsing at some point or another."

"Probably." I replied, and added an unnecessary comment. "Of course, I doubt the land will collapse in ten days' time."

"I think so too." Master Shizu answered immediately. "But..."

As Master Shizu trailed off, Ti looked up at him in silence.

"..."

—

Master Shizu used the floor as a desk and reproduced the map on a piece of paper from his room to the best of his abilities. Master Shizu had always had a talent for drawing--having made a nearly identical copy of the diagrams, he completed the map with Ti pointing out the collapsed areas.

When Master Shizu asked Ti if she knew how to write, she shook her head. We couldn't tell if this meant she was unable to or if she just didn't want to. Master Shizu did not pry.

It was almost lunchtime, but it was obvious that we couldn't make it to the dining hall in time even if we were to set out now. Master Shizu took a seat on the floor and took out portable rations from his parka pocket. He gave some of this clay-like food to myself and Ti.

"..."

Ti stared at the food in her hand for a bit, but she brought it to her mouth when she saw Master Shizu eating. She took a tiny bite with her small mouth.

"..."

For a single moment, her stoic expression crumbled. Her usually narrowed eyes turned into dinner plates.

"Do you like it?" Master Shizu asked with a glad expression.

"..."

Ti nodded enthusiastically with her usual stoic face.

She then nibbled on the portable ration with a serious look, holding it in both hands like a squirrel.

I'd never before seen anyone eat portable rations so enthusiastically--they were infamous among travellers for their tastelessness.

—

After lunch, we made our way back the way we came.

Of course, we were led by Ti. Not even I could make it back on my own without her.

The return trip took the same course over the deck. It was raining.

Thick droplets of rain fell upon us heavily. The sound of raindrops against the metal deck rang out around us. The clouds were even lower than they were before.

"..."

Ti stopped at the stairs, looking up at the sky.

"You don't want to get rained on, right? It's the same for everyone. But we can't just stay here forever." said Master Shizu. He then lightly put the side of his parka over Ti. Her tiny frame stuck right next to Master Shizu's right side. Master Shizu put on the parka's hood.

"Let's go."

"..."

Ti poked her head out from under the parka and stared up at Master Shizu. We couldn't tell if she had understood or not, but Ti went back under the parka and looked ahead.

"..."

"What shall I do, Master Shizu?" I asked.

"Sorry, but you're going to have to get rained on this time."

I knew it.

Master Shizu and Ti went out into the rain, matching their paces. I followed them, prepared to be drenched.

Plop plop plop. The raindrops hit the parka. Ti and Master Shizu walked from one metal plate to another in the rain. I followed right behind them, soaked.

About halfway to the entrance to the lower deck, Ti suddenly stopped. Master Shizu also stopped, confused. I looked back at them, having ended up going ahead.

"What's wrong, Ti?" Master Shizu asked, but Ti remained as silent as ever. All I could hear for a while was the sound of rain against parka.

Master Shizu raised the side of the parka to look at Ti. As there was now more of the parka to hit, the sound of raindrops became even louder.

"..."

Ti quietly raised her face and closed her eyes.

It looked like she was listening for something.

"Do you like this sound?" Master Shizu asked quietly.

"..."

Ti nodded.

Plop plop plop plop plop.

"Then I guess I'll have a listen too." Master Shizu said.

"What about me, Master Shizu?" I asked.

"Sorry, but you're going to have to get rained on this time."

I knew it.

I sat on the metal plate and watched them.



The tall Master Shizu and the small Ti.

Wrapped up in the parka, they listened to the mundane sound of raindrops against waterproof cloth.

I watched them, soaking wet. They stood there for what seemed like an eternity, the towering structure and the passing storm clouds as a backdrop.

—

Although people would still not give him work, Master Shizu had found himself a job and began to take action. He had decided to begin investigating the collapsed areas with Ti's help.

Master Shizu went to flooded or ruined areas and checked to see the extent of the damage. And when it was possible, he found out from Ti how long a given place had been in such a state. Ti had about five years' worth of clear memories, and as we had feared, the rate of damage was increasing every year.

In some places, we had no trouble figuring out the reason for the flooding. In these places, the 'floor' of the ship had been visibly split open. The thin plate that should have been held fast had been ripped apart about forty metres. According to Ti, the gashes had increased in size by about two metres every year.

That is how we spent the seventh and eighth days. Master Shizu was not the only one moving busily--Ti was working hard as well.

As a side note, we consumed a great percentage of our supply of portable rations in these two days. Although I worried about our supplies for when we arrived on shore, Master Shizu did not seem to be concerned.

"If that happens, we can catch fish at the seaside."

More fish?

—

The ninth day.

Though the country still shook, it felt like the tremors had lessened somewhat. We could still occasionally hear the screaming of metal, but after a while we got used to it. This was not a good thing.

After breakfast, Master Shizu requested to speak with the Elder. He visited the Elder's room and asked that all other residents vacate the room. Of course, Ti stayed at his side.

Master Shizu spoke to the Elder about the damage this land had sustained. However, he did not force his opinion of the dangers it posed. He just asked the Elder out of worry. That he had been taking a walk with Ti when they discovered such places, and that he was worried about them.

The Elder was perfectly calm when he told us that there was nothing to worry about. This was why:

"The People of the Tower know everything there is to know about this country. We will know of any impending danger because they will warn us."

Although we couldn't just accept these words as long as we didn't know about the People of the Tower, we could tell how the Elder (and these people) felt about the matter. As we expected, they were completely oblivious.

Master Shizu then began to investigate about the lives of these people. He slipped in questions about infant mortality rates and average lifespans in the conversation.

"I see..."

The Elder's answer was much more horrifying than we had expected. It wasn't too shocking, considering the terrible living conditions and the limited range of foods available for consumption.

Even though this was their beloved home, the land would eventually run out of inhabitants even if it were to stay afloat.

"We live happy lives. We always have, and we always will." The Elder proclaimed proudly.

—

"..."

It was as if Ti's silence had infected Master Shizu.

It was evening, and we were in our room. Master Shizu was sitting beside the bed, fingers clasped together. Sometimes he tapped his own forehead.

"..."

Ti sat on a chair beside a folding table, watching Master Shizu. In her hand was a cup of tea that Master Shizu had just brewed with solid fuel.

There was still some time left until dinner. Though I knew it was impudent of me, I spoke to Master Shizu, who had been locked in thought for so long.

"Master Shizu. Why not rest, or try a change of pace?"

Master Shizu glanced at me and agreed.

"What should we do?"

Master Shizu spoke in a joking tone. Of course, it would be difficult to organize a change of pace in this country of cramped rooms and hallways.

"..."

Suddenly, Ti put down her teacup and got up off her seat. She then walked up to Master Shizu and pulled on the shoulder of his parka.

"You want us to follow you? You're going to give us a change of pace?"

Ti nodded twice in reply, like a programmed doll.

—

"It's beautiful."

"How beautiful."

Master Shizu and I did not hide our wonder.

Ti had taken us to the top of the country's walls. We had left the room and followed Ti through the halls. After climbing what seemed to be an endless spiral staircase, we opened a hatch and found ourselves on the windswept man-made cliffs. The top of the wall was a pathway lined on either side by metal railings, and was about ten metres wide.

The sight that greeted us could only be described as 'magnificent'. The sun sunk into the horizon as it created orange columns of light between the grey clouds. The high waves crashed up against the wall, creating sparkling droplets of light.

The ocean was all we could see from the west-facing wall. It was almost like...

"It's like I'm flying." Master Shizu exclaimed, holding the railing. It really felt that way.

For a while, Master Shizu and I did nothing but stare at the gorgeous scene before our eyes. Eventually, Master Shizu looked back at Ti, who was holding onto the edge of his parka.

"Thank you. This was an amazing sight. To be honest, we'd more or less given up on seeing anything beautiful in this country, but I'm glad you proved us wrong."

"..."

Ti was as silent and stoic as ever, but something about her face looked very satisfied. The wind blew through her white hair as we stood on the wall.

—

The sun set, and the light that remained over the horizon lit up the clouds in the sky. Eventually, we were swallowed in darkness.

We stayed there until eventually, we could not distinguish the sea from the sky. This was because Ti was awestruck by the scene, refusing to budge an inch. Master Shizu stood there with Ti.

In the end, we missed dinner and ended up eating portable rations in our room instead.

Watching Ti practically devour her portion, I almost started to wonder if this was her goal from the beginning.

"..."

Ti said nothing.

—

Late night.

"The people don't understand this situation--they can't. In the end, it's up to how the ruling class sees this problem..."

"Yes."

Master Shizu and I whispered in secret. As the lights had gone out, the room was blanketed in darkness.

I stuck right next to Master Shizu's bed and continued the conversation, making sure to not wake Ti, who was asleep on the second level.

"If the ruling class doesn't change its position soon, there's no future for this country." Master Shizu declared. The map we had completed after three days of research had been covered in black marks that indicated collapsed areas. The rate of damage was increasing at an unbelievable speed.

"I agree. At this rate, this country will sink or its inhabitants will die--whichever one comes first. Either way, neither fate is too far off."

"And none of these people know. The fact that they live in hellish conditions... the fact that this country isn't such a paradise..."

"The people of this country, including the Elder, consider all this to be natural. Pointing it out won't make them understand."

"They say that 'a problem that's been ingrained into the society isn't thought of as a problem'. It's absolutely true..."

Silence followed Master Shizu's words. He was lost in thought. Suddenly, the noise echoed again.

And then--

"I've decided. I'm going to have a talk with the rulers tomorrow."

"Just to talk, Master Shizu? Not trying to convince them?"

"First, I'll have to see how they feel about the matter. Sleep well, Riku."

Master Shizu then fell asleep.

I didn't know what would happen tomorrow, but it seemed that neither Master Shizu nor myself would be faced with boredom.

—

The tenth day.

If all was according to plan, this country should be very close to the western continent. It would begin heading south along the currents that ran down the continent.

This country was scheduled to make a trade with the continent in four days' time. All Master Shizu and I had to do was arrive there safely. Then we would say goodbye to this land as if nothing had ever happened. We would never need to set foot here again.

After breakfast, Master Shizu took out his sword from the bag for the first time in nine days. It seemed his course was set.

Master Shizu then took out two small pouches made of cloth from his bag. He opened the covers and checked the contents. Inside each was a pair of what looked to be spray cans. Actually, these objects were a lot more dangerous than run-of-the-mill spray cans. Master Shizu did not use them if he could help it, but it seemed he deemed their use potentially necessary in this case. In the best-case scenario, he would never have to use them.

Master Shizu strapped these pouches on the right side of his belt. He then concealed the katana vertically under his parka.

"..."

"Stay here for a bit, Ti."

Master Shizu and I left the room as Ti watched us curiously.

"..."

And she followed us out as if it was perfectly normal.

"Look, Ti."

Master Shizu argued with Ti for a short time.

"I don't think I have anything for you to do today. Please wait in the room."

"..."

"Depending on what happens, things might get dangerous."

"..."

"You see..."

"..."

"Well..."

"..."

In the end, Ti pulled off an overwhelming victory with her silence. Master Shizu bowed his head. After all, we couldn't exactly tie her up back in the room.

"I'm counting on you, Riku."

In the end, I became Ti's guardian.

—

Master Shizu, Ti, and myself walked the path we had taken on our first day here and climbed onto the deck.

The sky was dark. The sun was hidden. Although the wind was weak, the dark skies wore heavily over us.

Once we had come outside, Master Shizu took out his sword and strapped it to his belt.

"Let's go..."

Master Shizu began walking to the tower from the deck. I had Ti follow me from behind and followed Master Shizu at a slight distance.

It was obvious that we would be clearly seen from the tower.

[Halt, traveller.]

We weren't particularly shocked to hear this voice being projected towards us. It was coming from a speaker attached to the tower. Master Shizu came to a stop about ten metres from the tower entrance.

"Hello. Can you hear me?"

[We hear thee, traveller. Several days yet remain ere this land reaches shore. Hast thou changeth thy mind? Thou dost wish to live among Us?]

"No, I merely wish to speak to you. It is a matter concerning the future of this country."

[Hm. Then We shall lend Our ears. Speak.]

It was a different voice from before. It was a familiar voice--the voice of the old man we spoke to on the day we arrived, the Captain.

Master Shizu stood there and revealed everything he felt about the current situation. He told them that he had looked into this country, and had found a problem that could not be contained, either structurally or socially. And that the inhabitants were oblivious to this problem.

"I ask you--how do you see this problem, as the leader who manages the lives of the thousands of citizens living in this land?"

The answer was immediate.

[We are unconcerned.]

Although I could not see, Master Shizu was probably frowning. He asked again.

"And by that, you mean...?"

[Should Our country fail to sustain itself, as thou dost claim, that shall be Our Fate.]

Once again, the answer was immediate.

"Maybe it doesn't matter to you, but what about your people? What will happen to them?"

There was force in Master Shizu's voice. I watched him from behind with Ti.

"..."

The voice came on again.

[This country is under Our rule. Both the land and its people belong to Us. Anything that happens to Our possession is Fate. It is merely the end. A mere traveller has no business in Our affairs.]

Although we had been half-expecting this sort of answer, it was surprising to hear them say this so bluntly. At this rate, it would not be difficult to drive Master Shizu to cause a commotion.

"I see... I understand what you're saying." Master Shizu uttered. There was no way he would back out and say, "then see you in four days" at this point.

"Then, if I should take over the tower and steer this country towards land... then you would consider this your Fate?"

[Verily.]

The entrance to the tower opened at the same time as the reply. And then--

"..."

A person dressed in black appeared before us.

He wasn't very tall, but the air of alertness around him suggested that he was an experienced fighter. They had probably sent out their most skilled warrior.

In his hand was a metre-long pump-action shotgun-style persuader. It seemed that he was carrying a hand persuader under his coat as well.

The Captain spoke in place of the man in black.

[Yet We cannot allow thee to do so.]

Master Shizu mumbled, "right", in a slightly welcoming tone.

The conversation was over. It was now time for persuasion. I pushed Ti off to the side with my head--standing behind Master Shizu would be dangerous if the man in black were to fire head-on.

Once Ti and myself had gotten behind a pile of scrap a little distance away--

"Let me say one thing..."

Master Shizu said to the man in black.

"If possible, I do not wish to kill the rulers, including you. Would you allow us to pass?"

"..."

Instead of a reply, we heard a click. It was the sound of a round being loaded into the persuader.

"It seems you don't intend to let me go so easily."

Master Shizu did not draw, but he slowly walked towards the man in black.

"If you listen to me, you'll all survive in the end."

Master Shizu spoke again as he continued to close in on the man in black. He distracted his opponent with the conversation while discreetly closing in at the same time. This was one of Master Shizu's favourite tricks.

In a shotgun, each shot contain about nine round pellets. The pellets scatter and fly off upon being fired, so they are a dangerous weapon. However, the pellets are not as effective at close range because they cannot scatter enough. Master Shizu would be able to dodge something like that.

Pump action persuaders must be reloaded with a pumping action after firing one shot. The long barrel also makes it difficult to aim in close quarters. Master Shizu was planning to use this extra time to step in close at once. The battle would be decided the moment his opponent pulled the trigger.

"Calm down. I don't intend on taking your life."

Master Shizu continued to approach the man in black and glanced up at the tower. He was checking to see if there was a sniper to provide support. I had been looking as well, but there seemed to be no such person yet.

There were now five metres between Master Shizu and the man in black. From the way he steadfastly refused to shoot, it seemed the man in black was quite the bold one.

"..."

Master Shizu watched the man in black, who held the gun with the barrel pointing towards the sky.

"You're pretty good."

Master Shizu's thumb reached his scabbard.

"..."

Ti was watching them both from on top of me.

And at the next moment.

"Hmph!"

Master Shizu reacted. The man in black had finally made a move. He put the persuader on his shoulder and aimed at Master Shizu.

The man in black had made his aim. Master Shizu must have seen his trigger finger move, as he evaded to the right without drawing.

Fire.

The pellets ripped through the air with a bang. Master Shizu drew and attacked the man in black.

There would be no time to reload. No time to aim.

It was Master Shizu's victory.

The moment I thought this, however, the man in black did something unthinkable.

"What?!"

It was no shock Master Shizu was yelling as well. The man in black had thrown away his persuader immediately after firing.

It seemed he had planned to do so from the start. The man in black tossed away the persuader as one would swing a spear. What kind of idiot would throw away a persuader in a fight, I wondered, but this man in front of us was one such person.

"Damn!"

Master Shizu drew to parry this unexpected attack. It was somewhat difficult for him to toss aside the heavy persuader whilst approaching.

And in this moment of delay, the man in black drew a hand persuader.

He was unbelievably quick. The man in black aimed at Master Shizu from a low angle immediately upon drawing.

"Hm!"

Master Shizu came to a stop. He took a step back and went into a defensive stance. He could not close the distance at this point. The persuader Master Shizu had knocked away finally fell onto the steel plates in the distance, and a powerful metallic sound rang out.

"Phew... That was a surprise."

Master Shizu spoke with his katana raised, still at a deadlock with the man in black, who had his gun trained on Master Shizu.

"I was surprised as well."

The man in black spoke, and cast off the veil over his face with his left hand.

"Wha-"

"What?!"

Master Shizu and I could not hide our shock.

"..."

Ti silently watched our surprise with a curious look.

The person in front of us was a familiar face.

"You're... Kino!"



Master Shizu called out her name. She was the final opponent Master Shizu had faced at the coliseum back in his homeland. And Master Shizu had lost to her.

Kino took off her hat and veil with her left hand and dropped them on the metal floor. Her short, slightly messy black hair was exposed to the wind.

"I was grateful for the clothes they lent me, but wearing this makes it a bit difficult to fight."

"What are you..."

Master Shizu stopped mid-sentence. He had figured out the answer.

There was a traveller who entered this country for the crossing five days ago. That traveller must have been Kino. In other words, Kino was here at the request of the People of the Tower.

"This... is some reunion."

Master Shizu relaxed the grip on his katana and smiled at Kino.

"Yes. It is. Um... I'm glad to see you're well." Kino replied stoically.

"Thanks. Same for you."

"Thank you."

After the greetings, Kino asked a question.

"So... what was your name again?"

"..."

Although I couldn't tell if she was being serious or if this was some sort of psychological attack, Master Shizu seemed to be quite disheartened from the slightly disappointed tone of his voice.

"Shizu..."

"Oh, that's right. And the one behind you is Riku. I remember."

"..."

That was quite cruel. Master Shizu must have been hurt even more.

"In any case, I'm working for the rulers of this land until we reach the western continent in exchange for being allowed to stay here. I don't really want to do this, but I have to live too. Would you please go back?"

Kino got straight to the heart of the matter.

"I refuse."

"You're not a citizen of this country. I don't understand why you're doing something for a stranger's land without even being asked to."

Kino declared calmly. It was certainly like her to coldly point out the logic of the situation. Normally, of course, she would be right. A traveller must worry only for his own safety. He has no obligation to concern himself with the matters of other countries or people. To risk his life for them would be insanity.

However, Master Shizu's answer was immediate.

"It's because I realized something. If I can do something to give all these people a 'future'..."

"..."

I felt like I could hear Master Shizu tighten his grip on his sword.

"I feel like I just have to try, you know?"

I could not see Master Shizu's face, but I'm sure he must be laughing from his heart.

"I see... Then it can't be helped. I will do my job."

Kino tensed.

"Round two, then?"

I could see Master Shizu tense as well.

Although Kino's revolver was at waist-level and aimed at Master Shizu, it would be possible for Master Shizu to deflect it.

I thought for a moment that we would be at a deadlock once again, but Kino surprised us yet another time. She aimed her revolver at myself and Ti.

"No!"

Master Shizu hurriedly drew. Kino pulled the trigger.

There was a loud noise and white smoke. Her right arm recoiled upwards.

And the bullet...

"..."

The bullet passed over the head of Ti, who had not moved an inch. In fact, it passed very high above her head. It had probably hit an iron wall eventually, but we could hear nothing. So this was what she was after.

Though Master Shizu had only been shocked for a moment, the second he turned back towards Kino--

"What?"

He saw Kino sprinting away like no tomorrow. She ran for the entrance at top speed and disappeared into the tower.

It would be extremely difficult to dodge rounds flying from a covered tower. Master Shizu quickly moved away from the entrance and dashed towards the tower, sticking close to the right of the wide-open door.

"Hmph. Not bad." Master Shizu spoke in an amused tone.

"..."

Suddenly, Ti got up without a word and ran towards Master Shizu before I could stop her. I quickly followed after her. Although we did not have to worry about being sniped by Kino for now, we were not completely safe.

I finally caught up to Ti right beside the tower entrance. Ti was standing on the left side, opposite Master Shizu. I stood at her feet.

"It'll be over soon." Master Shizu assured Ti as she watched on with a worried look. He sheathed his katana and took out a 'spray can' from the pouch on his belt. He took hold of the lever and pulled the pin with his teeth.

"Cover your ears, Ti."

"..."

Once he confirmed that Ti had done as she was told, Master Shizu yelled loudly into the entrance.

"Give up, Kino! I'll spare you!"

I'd heard these words before. Of course, there was no way she would surrender.

"I refuse!"

Kino's voice loudly echoed out from the hallway.

"Of course." Master Shizu responded, and tossed the spray can. The lever at the side of the can fell off in midair.

The object rolled, disappearing into the hallway. Then it exploded.

A sonic wave came over us, and a brilliant flash of light erupted. The hall filled with light, and we could see a long, thin sliver of the inside of the door.

Master Shizu had just thrown a special weapon called a flashbang, also known as a stun grenade.

A flashbang ignites and and explodes four seconds after the pin is pulled and the lever falls away. It works the same way as a normal grenade, but instead of the lethal blast of energy and shrapnel, it creates a bright flash of light and a loud blast. As I could not cover my ears, the noise hit me very hard. My head was spinning.

And if I felt this much shock from outside the hallway, Kino must have been incapacitated. If she was unconscious, it would be Master Shizu's victory.

Once the faint smoke had cleared, Master Shizu drew and tentatively stepped in. He moved forward with the sword in front of him so he could deflect and bullets that came his way. I did everything I could to stop Ti from poking her head in to see.

"What happened...?" Master Shizu mumbled in confusion.

"She's not here..." he responded before I could even ask. I looked into the tower. Ti looked around as well.

Master Shizu was the only one in the dark hallway. Kino was nowhere to be found. At the end of the 20-metre long hallway was the door to the elevator hall. It was firmly shut.

It was possible that Kino had disappeared behind the door, but it was difficult to imagine that his voice could have been heard from behind such a thick door. There was nowhere to run in the hallway.

Master Shizu had walked about half the span of the hallway when Ti suddenly stepped on my paw.

"Ouch!"

"..."

I ended up exclaiming without even thinking. Master Shizu turned around.

"..."

Master Shizu and I both looked at Ti, who pointed at the side of the hallway.

Master Shizu ran over and looked at where she was pointing, then spoke.

"Thank you. Stand back."

It was not a surprise to see that she had been the one to point this out. Ti was gesturing towards a large hole that seemed to be some sort of ventilation or sewage shaft and a lattice covering. The covering was not fixed to the opening.

Master Shizu gingerly removed the cover and entered the shaft, sliding down. The sound of his sliding eventually stopped.

"Hah!"

Immediately afterwards, we heard Master Shizu's cry, the sound of some metal structure breaking, and the sound of something collapsing. It seemed he was battling Kino, who had escaped downstairs.

We could not hear any persuaders being fired. The sounds of battle ceased after several seconds. I looked into the shaft. And just as I wondered if I should follow Master Shizu down--

"..."

"Whoa!"

Ti pushed me in from behind. I fell straight in and slid at an odd position, landing head-first at the foot of the stairs. It hurt very much.

I saw Master Shizu's back the moment I fell, but he was quickly obscured by Ti's leg. She had followed me down. I counted myself lucky that my nose had not been stepped on.

"She got away." Master Shizu told us with a slightly cheerful look.

When I got up, I could see that this was a large hallway. Under our feet was a surface of metal. To our sides were many pipes running along the walls, and there were lattice-shaped metal plates lined up on the ceiling. There were light-emitting diodes on the walls that made this space brighter than the hallway.

Master Shizu had his sword trained on a three-way intersection.

"In any case, she got to take a nice bath." Master Shizu explained.

There was a puddle on the floor, and a water tank that should have been on the ceiling was rolling at our feet, having been split open the long way. Master Shizu had cut it open and kicked it at her. The trail of water droplets headed right. It was easy to tell where Kino had gone.

Master Shizu slowly began moving. I followed him at a slight distance, and Ti followed after me.

Very carefully, Master Shizu turned the corner. Kino was not there. There was yet another three-way intersection ahead. Master Shizu followed the trail. The water drops continued on.

After more walking, we came across another intersection. This time it was a four-way crossing. The water droplets headed left. Master Shizu, suspecting a trap, checked the right before heading left.

"Stay here." Master Shizu whispered as soon as he turned the corner. Ti and I stopped in our tracks.

Plop.

We could hear water falling. Twice, and a third time.

About five metres ahead of Master Shizu, water was falling from the lattice-shaped ceiling panels and creating a puddle on the floor. Ten metres ahead of him was another four-way intersection. There was no water there.

Master Shizu prepared to cut as he silently walked forward, step by step.

The moment before the puddle was within reach of Master Shizu, the ceiling tiles opened with a clunk. The tiles flew into the air and a black shape fell from the opening.

"Hah!"

Master Shizu cut the shape as it fell. He knew it was not Kino--it was probably a trap she set with some ropes.

And as we expected, the object that had fallen was a wet black coat. After being hit with Master Shizu's katana, it hit the wall with a squelch. Having deduced that Kino could snipe him from the intersection, Master Shizu quickly turned around.

At that very moment, another shadow fell from above--and right in front of Master Shizu. Was it Kino?

"Hah!"

Master Shizu knocked away the object with the blunt side of the sword.

With a sharp noise, the object--the half-empty water tank--hit the wall and fell to the ground with a crash. It was another trick.

I could hear footsteps on the left path of the intersection mixed in with the crash. There was no mistaking it.

Master Shizu began to run as well. It seemed he was planning to close the distance at once to take on Kino. He ran under the opening, and--

Kino appeared from the ceiling. She came down head-first with her knees hanging on to the opening. She was wearing the same black jacket as before. In her hand was a revolver. Her short hair was hanging upside-down.

The revolver was pointed directly at Master Shizu's back. Kino was here all along--the noise from the hallway had been the real trick.

"Damn...!"

By the time Master Shizu noticed Kino from behind him and turned, he must have seen the .44 caliber gun staring down at him, and Kino's upside-down face behind it.

A heavy gunshot echoed through the hallway.

Master Shizu had lost again. He fell back, having been hit by the shot.

—

"..."

The first thing Master Shizu saw upon awakening was Ti's face, her green eyes staring down at him in silence.

It only took five seconds for Master Shizu to get shot and lose consciousness. Kino skillfully got to the ground on one arm from her position on the ceiling. She picked up Master Shizu's sword and stood it against the wall.

On Master Shizu's forehead was the mark of having been shot at point-blank range. A huge black bruise. I suspect it will become a swollen bump.

Ti was holding the bullet that had shot Master Shizu.

"What? Am I alive?" Master Shizu asked as he sat up. Ti quickly stepped away.

"They told me that I couldn't lower the population..." Kino explained. Ti showed Master Shizu the object she was holding. It was a hard piece of .44 caliber rubber. A nonlethal rubber bullet. This was why we did not hear anything when she shot at us earlier. Kino explained that she significantly had decreased the amount of liquid fuel.

"They told me to use those."

"... So I lose again..." Master Shizu mumbled angrily, and looked at Ti, who was standing in front of him.

Although he didn't die--or rather, because he didn't die--Master Shizu knew he had to admit defeat. and this meant leaving the people of this country, including Ti, to their inhuman living conditions and inevitable doom.

"I'm sorry, but I'll have to ask you to stay quiet for a few more days." Kino uttered. She had already holstered her persuader. Of course, she would draw it in a moment's notice should something happen.

Although I was curious to see what Master Shizu would do next, I was interrupted by the voice of a man in black, which came over a speaker.

[Kino, can you hear us?]

"Yes, I can hear you. I've finished my job. And as I requested--"

[Kino, can you hear us? Are you safe?]

"I can hear you." Kino answered loudly, but the man in black continued to search for Kino.

[If you can hear us, please answer!]

It seemed that it was the man in black who could not hear anything.

"They should be able to hear my voice as long as we're in the tower." Kino mumbled incredulously. And at that exact moment--
-

[Hm. Traveller Shizu. We cannot allow thee to do as thou dost please.]

It was the voice of the Captain. He seemed to be quite upset. And he was under the completely wrong impression.

[This land shall now make its way back to the sea.]

"What? Wait!" Kino yelled, but her voice did not reach the Captain. We could hear something moving beneath our feet, and we felt vibrations running through the land. It was the sound of a propulsion system. It was a kind of shaking completely different from yesterday's.

"It can't be... they're moving the country?" Master Shizu asked.

"..."

Ti nodded.

"Wait! Then what happens to me?"

[This country shall never see land again. Live with the people until thy death, Traveller Shizu.]

We received an answer, although they probably did not hear Kino's question.

The country continued to shake. We could hear the propulsion systems running continuously. We could also hear the sound of screaming metal multiple times. It was obvious that this land was being pushed very hard for this movement.

"Well, then..." Master Shizu began as he got to his feet. There was a huge black bruise on his forehead.

Master Shizu was talking to Kino. He had a look of great joy on his face.

"I'm going to go up to the tower and take over the control room. Then I'll steer this country to land. I'll muscle my way through if necessary. Do you want to come along?"

"But I won..."

Kino returned the sword to its owner with a sore look.

—

"What?! You wretches, how did you-- Ugh!"

The man in black was hit by the blunt side of Master Shizu's sword before he could finish.

The only way up the tower other than the elevator was a long spiral staircase. Master Shizu led the way, followed by Kino, myself, and Ti.

Master Shizu mercilessly tossed aside the men in black who stood in our way.

"You would try to overthrow--Ahh!"

Although she didn't seem too enthusiastic, Kino shot rubber bullets into the heads of men in black who would suddenly pop out of doors on the sides.

And as we made our way up--

"Take the door on your side. I need to get something."

Master Shizu complied with Kino's request and opened the heavy door at the side of the stairs. Two people attacked us with knives as soon as it opened, but Master Shizu took care of them with the blunt side of the sword and the scabbard.

"This is..."

Master Shizu mumbled, astonished. Stacked inside the room were countless wooden crates. The crates were filled with things like ammunition and explosives. It was a weapon storage facility.

"Let's take a few things. They have some of those loud grenades, too." Kino started as she opened one of the crates. She took out a flashbang and tossed it to Master Shizu.

"..."

Ti was behind me at the time. It was for a very short moment, but I did not see what she was doing.

—

We glanced at the fallen men in black as we resumed the climb upwards.

There were not many of them. The rest of the people in black were in the control room on the top floor.

We defeated the guards at the entrance and opened the door. The people in black were weak. This might have been because Master Shizu had just fought against Kino, but these people could not even put up a proper fight before they fell one by one. We entered the control room after tossing in a pair of flashbangs. Several people were lying on the floor.

The control room looked like the bridge of a ship. We could see very far through the windows. Lights on the machinery glowed faintly.

Outside we could see the faint outline of land. It must be the western continent we were headed for.

Master Shizu was off to the side as he searched the machines. He soon found a blinking monitor. The powerful technology that created this country was still intact.

Perhaps he had found out a method of operation. Master Shizu reached out to the monitor. Soon, the entire country tilted to the side as if it had come to a sudden stop. We felt the listing even more because we were high up in the tower.

"Have you figured it out?" Kino asked worriedly, holding the revolver at waist-level and ready to fire. Soon, the western continent became bigger and bigger. Master Shizu simply responded that all he had to do was input the command to the monitor.

Suddenly, the control room door opened and the Captain appeared. Kino quickly aimed for him. The Captain was being supported on either side by people in black who seemed to be female. They were all unarmed.

Master Shizu looked at them.

"..."

Ti also stared at them.

"What will you do, traveller?"

Master Shizu answered honestly. He told them that he would drag the ship onto land so it would not sink. And that he would suggest to the people that they settle on land.

"What will you gain from all of this?"

"I could at least save the people from these horrid living conditions. At this rate, they will all die."

"You intend to become their king?"

This question could even have come across as an insult to Master Shizu.

"If necessary."

Master Shizu answered tersely yet with resolution. I could see Kino shrug, slightly skeptical.

"It is decided. You are the next one. Live together."

With these incomprehensible words, the Captain crumpled to the ground.

"What?"

Suddenly, the women supporting him also fell to the floor as if having lost consciousness.

"This is strange..."

Kino warily approached them, but they did not even twitch.

"..."

As Master Shizu, Ti, and I watched, Kino kneeled beside the Captain and slowly took the hat off his face.

—

The people in black were not human.

Where the Captain's head should have been was a wad of cotton shaped to look like a human head. In other words, he was a cotton doll. There were no expressions. It was just flat, dirty cotton.

Kino pulled back the sleeve of the 'Captain'. The arm was also cotton wrapped around a core. It was the same with the two people beside him.

"..."

"What's going on...?"

Kino fell silent, and Master Shizu mumbled. Of course, no one could answer.

Soon, Kino put the hats and veils back on their heads.

—

As we got closer and closer to land, we could get a clear view of the coastline.

Kino looked through a huge pair of binoculars in the control room and told us that the shoreline was rocky, but that there was a large sandy beach a little further to the south.

Master Shizu confirmed this. It was a sandy inlet that was longer than the country was wide. It was the perfect place to beach the ship.

As Master Shizu focused on the controls, Kino spoke to him from behind.

"In any case, I'm counting on you. And I'd like to ask that you turn the southern loading bay entrance towards the beach. That will make things easier for both you and I."

"Understood."

Master Shizu responded, and tapped on the machine. The 'Ship Country slowly but surely spun as it made its way to the beach. We heard the screaming of metal again several times, but it was no longer anything to worry about.

"I'll be making preparations to leave this country now." Kino said, and left the control room.

Master Shizu watched everything until the end. The Ship Country approached the beach without a hitch. And as if the country was equipped with this feature from the start, it slowly braked as it beached itself and stopped.

It was just about noon. The sun shone between the clouds and brought light to a black country that was born onto the beach.

—

Master Shizu activated the ship's speaker system.

He announced to the people that the country had arrived on land, and that they should go outside to see for themselves. He played with the control system, and very slowly, the gate on the beach side opened.

Although there was no reaction to tell us that anyone had heard the announcement, Master Shizu exited the control room.

He went down to the first floor and ran across the deck. We could see the gates, nearly fully open. We kept running, but Ti followed us without a word.

When we arrived at the residential area, there was a huge commotion. The people spotted Master Shizu and asked him if the announcement just now was real.

"Go and see for yourselves." Master Shizu responded.

Everyone crowded their way up to the deck.

Master Shizu went to his room and retrieved his bag, and passed the empty residential area as he headed for the buggy. He told Ti that she didn't have to follow along, but she came with us anyway.

We passed the lifeless forms of the people in black and entered the storage area. The buggy was still parked there, looking just as it did when we first arrived. Master Shizu reconnected the battery and started the engine.

Just as Kino intended, the dredged dock floor was connected directly to the beach.

We could see fresh tire tracks from a motorrad. It was probably from that ____ing motorrad.

—

Master Shizu drove the buggy onto the beach. As Ti was sitting in the passenger seat, I had to curl up at her feet. I ended up getting kicked a few times as the buggy shook.

On the wide, bright sands was a huge, black tower that seemed to divide the sea and the land. It was difficult to tell if we were inside or outside the walls.

Many people were outside. Several hundred or more. It was definitely more than one tribe.

They looked on at the beach and the endless plains to the west with looks of confusion. It seemed most of them had never seen land before. Some people were touching the sand in surprise, and others tried lying down on it.

Kino stood about two hundred metres away, looking in our direction. She was at the point where the beach met the plain. Beside her was the fully packed and loaded motorrad. There was a powerful-looking rifle hanging on her back. Was it just a precautionary measure? She was a very careful person.

Master Shizu parked the buggy in front of the people. We could see old people, including the Elder of the tribe we lived with, surrounded by younger people. There were four of them altogether--they were probably the Elders of each tribe.

Of course, people began swarming towards Master Shizu. The buggy was soon completely surrounded. We were bombarded with questions from all directions.

Master Shizu stood from his seat and began speaking, every pair of eyes locked on him. He told them that he could not sit back and watch the tyrannical rule of the People of the Tower--that he tried to talk with them, and that he had defeated them.

"They all escaped to another country on another ship. They are no longer in this land. I entered the control room and set this country here on this continent."

Shock and confusion spread through the crowds like a huge wave. It was a natural reaction. After all, their oppressive rulers had just been overthrown.

"You no longer have to live according to the rule of the People of the Tower. You can all live on this land now. You can use the country for shelter temporarily, until you can transplant the country's technology onto land and build walls for defence. You can set ships onto the sea from land to catch fish. You can start a new life now."

The people just watched Master Shizu in awe.

There were several seconds--no, minutes--of silence. No one spoke. Even the waves were rendered silent by the sheer size of the country. All of the adults of the tribes looked astonished. I could practically hear the confusion going through their minds.

The moment I thought that they might need some time to comprehend everything, a child standing behind the buggy spoke to his mother beside him.

"I wanna go back..."

It was a tiny voice, but it carried very well through the silent crowd.

"Let's go back. Let's go."

The child begged again. The mother kneeled beside her son and asked him a question.

"Why do you say that? We could start living here from now on. Why do you want to go back?"

It almost sounded like she was asking these questions to her own confused self. The child's answer was resolute.

"The ground's not shaking at all. The floor's soft. There's no walls or roofs. I don't like it."

It was a strange thing to say, but these words brought to the people a wave of love for their homeland. It became a great current that spread through the people, different from what Master Shizu had caused earlier.

They soon reached a conclusion.

"Yeah. Let's go back."

People began saying. These words gradually increased in volume. We could hear things like, "I don't like it here", "It feels weird", "We like the way we used to live", "We can't catch fish here", and "We're going to get rained on".

"There will be no future for you if you go back." Master Shizu announced clearly. "It may take several years, or maybe even decades. It might even be now. This country will sink. And everyone will die. There is no future for you unless you start over on land."

The Elder who had allowed us residence talked back to Master Shizu.

"That's impossible! Our country has always been perfectly fine. It will not sink! Don't try to feed us your lies!"

The Elder's unfounded declaration seemed to have gained more acceptance than Master Shizu's factual information. Everyone began to express their agreement.

And the Elder then drove in the final nail on this coffin.

"In any case, travellers like you are wanderers who have lost their homelands. How would someone like you know about the love people have for their own countries?!"

The Elder wasn't wrong. Master Shizu was indeed a wanderer, and most people greatly valued their homelands. In a certain sense, a place to call home could be everything to someone.

Master Shizu had two choices.

The first would be to 'persuade' these people as he had done with the People of the Tower. It would be difficult, but not impossible.

The other...

"I see. Then I have nothing more to say."

The other choice was to accept that his actions did not lead to his desired conclusion. Master Shizu chose the latter.

Although I could not see his face, Master Shizu could not hide his sadness.

But from what I could see, Master Shizu had given them the choice to decide their own futures. This was their decision to make. It was not Master Shizu's business whether they all drowned or not.

"Wait. If the People of the Tower are gone..." One person mumbled in realization. "Shouldn't our tribe be the ones who get to control this country from now on?"

There was a murmur of approval from his fellow tribesmen, and dissent from the other tribes. Soon, an argument broke out.

"There's no use arguing about this here! All we have to do is take over the tower first!" One person yelled, and ran back into the country. The men of the other tribes took off after him. They began to push each other aside and stampede along.

The women and children soon went back to the country. They showed no regret for this land that could have been their new home. People disappeared into the gap in the black wall like a flood. There was nothing left around the buggy but footprints.

I could not see what kind of face Master Shizu was making as he watched all this. I did not need to.

"..."

Ti said nothing. She had been sitting in the passenger seat of the buggy this entire time.

As he watched the people leave, he spoke to Ti in a soft voice.

"I've failed. Go back to your country, Ti."

"..."

Ti said nothing.

As I expected that Ti would go back through the gates, I did not pay her much attention. I just sat back and watched everyone disappear into the country.

Master Shizu got off the buggy and onto the empty beach, leaving his footprints in the sand.

"..."

Ti also got off the buggy and followed his footsteps, coming to a stop beside Master Shizu. I expected that she would say goodbye and return to her homeland.

But Ti did not go back. She still stood on the beach, a slight distance from the Buggy. She stayed beside Master Shizu.

I realized that the large pocket on Ti's back was bulging. I did not recall it being in such a state when we first entered the tower.

"What is it, Ti? If you don't go now, they might end up leaving you behind."

"..."

Ti took out a metal container from the pocket on her back. It was a cylindrical case. It looked like a baton used by security guards, but there was something protruding from the centre.

It was not a grenade or a baton, but a sheathed knife. It was a black knife with a cylindrical handle and sheath. Ti quickly unsheathed it and made to attack Master Shizu's side.

Master Shizu would not be so easily overtaken by an enemy he was facing down, but this was a completely different situation. Ti's knife stabbed into Master Shizu's flesh.

"Hah!"

Master Shizu still managed to move away. The tip of the blade sliced through Master Shizu's parka, shirt, and skin. Fresh red blood sprayed onto the sand.

It looked very painful, but I could tell it was not a critical injury. That was why I did not loudly call out Master Shizu's name or anything of the sort. I remained quiet so as to not distract him.

Master Shizu stepped back. He backed in towards land, about five metres between himself and Ti. She still held the knife in her hands, but Master Shizu did not draw.

They were facing each other down on the right side of the buggy.

"..."

Master Shizu looked at Ti, who silently pointed her knife at him. He reached his right hand to his side and looked at the blood on the back of his hand.

"I'm sorry for making you angry, Ti." he told her in a completely unchanged tone. I wondered if he was misunderstanding things, but I said nothing.

We could hear a dull metal sound in the distance, and the loud roar of an engine.

The metal sound had come from the hole in the wall. The gate that had been raised was slowly coming down, leaving Ti behind. It seemed that the people of that country did not care what happened to her.

The sound of the engine was Kino riding up to the buggy on her motorrad. She parked the motorrad beside the buggy, still with the rifle slung over her shoulder.

Master Shizu turned to his right and looked at Kino and myself.

"Don't get involved. Let me talk this out with her."

Although the wound was not deep, Master Shizu's side continued to bleed. However, I did not leave the buggy despite my concerns.

Master Shizu then went back to facing Ti head-on. He could probably see the tall black walls behind her, and the gates slowly closing.

"If you don't go now, you won't be able to get back in, Ti." Master Shizu told her.

"..."

Ti did not answer. She did not even try to go back.

Neither Master Shizu nor I could understand what she was thinking.

"So that girl's 'Tifana'? I get it!"

The scrapheap of a motorrad in Kino's possession spoke up. Normally I would have quipped, 'Keep your mouth shut. Oh wait, motorrads don't have mouths anyway', but now was not the time.

How did he know Ti's name? He must have been locked in the storehouse until just now. Not even Kino should know her name.

Master Shizu was also surprised. He looked over at us.

"The thing is..."

The motorrad began. It seemed he was going to explain without us even having to ask.

"I was really bored when I was sitting there in the storehouse, so I talked to the guys in black who were patrolling around. Since they weren't human, either, they told me a lot of stuff. They told me who they were, and about that girl."

"What did they say?" Kino asked, mildly surprised. I wasn't too happy that the scrapheap of a motorrad was the one who was attracting all the attention and telling us everything, but all we could do at this point was hear him out.

"I promised them I wouldn't tell Kino until we were out of the country. I was planning to talk about it to pass the time when we were travelling on the continent, but I guess I can say it now. The guys in black are gone, anyway."

Hurry up and get to the point, you piece of junk.

"'Tifana' is the name of a drifting ship that arrived at that country."

"A drifting ship?" Kino asked.

"That's right. About six hundred years ago, a lost ship arrived at an abandoned floating city. That ship was the Tifana. It was some kind of a pilgrimage or migration vessel, but the ship was carrying hundreds and hundreds of kids under three years of age. Anyone who was older apparently died of some new plague."

The motorrad peacefully recited the story on the beach. The gates were slowly closing.

"That ship had an auto-pilot system. It had a certain level of artificial intelligence. But since all the adults died, there was no one around to give it orders. The machine didn't know what to do, so it just kept the ship wandering around the sea, keeping the kids well-fed."

"So the people now are the descendants of those children..." said Master Shizu.

"Yeah, and the machine was the people in black."

"What do you mean, Hermes?"

"The machine decided to have the children live in that country. After all, they had a better chance of survival there than on the Tifana. It then moved its main controls to the tower. There was still energy left in the power supply, and there were still some salvageable things even though the city was abandoned. You know how the people in black were all dolls? They said that they made it that way because the children needed human-shaped caretakers. The machine raised the kids for a while. Soon the kids grew up enough to work for themselves. But there was a problem."

"There was no one to lead and control them." said Master Shizu, looking forward. Even if the children had grown, they were still children. They would live lawlessly, create disputes, and eventually fall into chaos. The motorrad continued happily.

"That's a prince for you."

Anyway, keep talking.

"So the machine thought about it, and decided to create a "Powerful Entity" to keep everyone alive. That was the ruling class. One day, they created the people in black and claimed that they were the people who had been living there since ancient times. That was when they just came up with the black clothes. In any case, the rulers made the kids find food. They had them fix up old machinery and use them in trades in order to help them get a hold of things they needed for survival. So the children matured and lived on as the people. Since there wasn't much else to do, there was a population explosion. The people who split off in disputes created their own tribes, but there wasn't any bloodshed until now. This was the history of the Ship Country."

After this innocent history lesson--

"Why didn't the people in black just beach this land earlier?"

Kino asked a simple yet obvious question. The motorrad answered.

"I asked about it too. They thought about settling the country on land, but they couldn't reveal the identity of the People of the Tower. And there was no guarantee that other countries would protect people who were under the rule of something inhuman. They also didn't believe that the people would be able to sustain themselves in such an unfamiliar environment, so they eventually gave up on that idea."

"So that's why he said to me, 'You are the next one'..." Master Shizu mumbled. That was definitely what the captain had said. It was not an insult--the captain was leaving the future of this country in Master Shizu's hands.

As Ti stood there with the knife, as expressionless as ever, we could see the gate. It was half-closed.

"Tell me about Ti. How do you know her name?" Master Shizu asked the motorrad. If he didn't hurry, the gate would close completely.

"All right. That girl isn't actually from this country."

"..."

Ti still had the knife pointed at Master Shizu without a word. But I could tell that she was trembling ever-so-slightly.

"That girl is the daughter of a pair of travellers who stayed on the Ship Country to cross the ocean."

"I see. So that's why she looks so different." said Kino. Ti was definitely the only person there with white hair.

"Did her parents pass away?" Master Shizu asked.

"No, she was abandoned." the motorrad answered.

—

If the scrapheap of a motorrad wasn't lying (which he has no reason to), Ti had been left behind.

Her parents were a pair of wanderers who travelled through many countries. It was common for married couples to be travelling together. They had come to this country thirteen years ago for the crossing. They initially intended to disembark at the continent within days, but something about this country caught their interest and they ended up staying for over a year.

This was when Ti was born. Apparently they were both very happy at first. The people in black also did everything they could to give them support. As a side note, Ti had a different name back then.

But as they slowly grew tired of life in that country and contemplated leaving, one thing nagged at their thoughts.

'How are we supposed to travel with a baby?'

It would be indeed very difficult to wander with a baby--but not entirely impossible.

Having made their decision, they left the country and left Ti behind. They made a doll to look like a baby so they could trick the people as they departed.

The people in black later found Ti, crying alone in the storehouse. However, there was nothing they could do at this point. The travellers had already made it to land, enjoying their lives as wanderers.

After some deliberation, the people in black--the machine--decided to raise Ti themselves. They could not trust the people with her, as they greatly valued blood connections.

So they gave her a new name: Tifana. The name of the ship that started it all.

Ti was taught many things as she grew up. They told her from the beginning that she had been abandoned by her parents. They also told her that the people in black were not human.

In other words, Ti was the princess of this country. The food they received from trading was mainly used to keep Ti healthy. The machine knew that the common people's diet was extremely dangerous.

Ti was the only person who was allowed to wander the country as she pleased. The people feared her, as she could appear anywhere at any time. They even treated her as an omen of disaster or a demon. And she actually did some work spying on the people. I finally understood why Ti knew so much about the country when we were looking at the extent of the damage.

The people in black were also the ones who sent Ti to Master Shizu. This was because they had never had anyone so strange that they would willingly choose to stay with the people--Ti was our watch.

"So she was spying on you."

The motorrad told us, but I understood something else.

The people in black had decided that, if Ti took a liking to Master Shizu, she could go along with him if she wanted to.

The captain had told us this just before the end.

"Live together."

Those words had been directed towards Ti. It was the last words the machine had for their princess--to follow Master Shizu, the next king--and to live on.

The people in black were gone. There was no place for Ti in that country. She would likely die a terrible death if she could not stay with Master Shizu.

Although Master Shizu meant well, the words "go back" must have struck her like a death sentence.

The moment I was about to say this to Master Shizu, we heard a terrible noise from the closing gate. It seemed something had gotten caught between it. We could hear the sound of metal breaking.

And immediately afterwards--

"I don't have anywhere to go back to!"

It took me a while to realize that this clear, high-pitched voice belonged to Ti. Master Shizu was shocked as well. And another kind of surprise shocked him again.

"..."

Master Shizu slowly looked down from Ti, upon whom his gaze was fixed.

"Oh..."

He looked at his own stomach.

The shock was only natural. Even I was astonished. Kino tensed. I could hear the sound of foot against sand.

"Oh dear."

I could hear the motorrad speak.

There was a knife sticking out of Master Shizu's stomach. It had pierced into him quite deep.

The parka had been skewered by the knife as well, and it was stuck flat against Master Shizu's stomach. blood dripped down onto his jeans.

There was a silvery metal cylinder connected to the knife. Ti was still at a distance, still holding the hilt.

The mystery was soon solved. I saw a thick spring sticking out of the hilt Ti was holding. The knife was built so that pressing the protrusion in the middle would send the blade flying with the spring mechanism.

"Oh... Ti..."

Master Shizu coughed up blood as he slumped to the ground. His knees fell into the sand. His unfocused eyes looked at Ti, then the sky, and finally, to the side. Master Shizu fell onto the beach with his back to me.

In the short amount of time that Master Shizu took to fall, Ti abandoned her bladeless knife and took out an identical weapon from her pocket. She was still as stoic as ever.

"Which one?" Kino asked, before I could even talk or think. In her right hand was a large-caliber revolver.

"That wound looks pretty bad."

She didn't have to point it out. Without immediate treatment, Master Shizu would die--of blood loss or otherwise.

Kino asked me to choose. She wanted me to choose which one would die.

If I chose to save Master Shizu, the .44 caliber round would blow away half of Ti's face. If I did not make a choice, Master Shizu would die on the beach with blood spilling from his stomach.

Kino had no obligation to save either Master Shizu or Ti. It wouldn't matter to her to kill either--or both. All she would have to do is leave me here with a buggy I can't drive and continue on her own journey with the motorrad.

But from her question, it became clear that she wanted me to make a decision.

The answer was ridiculously simple.

I took a breath, ready to utter my answer at Kino.

"Neither one!"

That was not my answer.

"Neither one!"

It was Master Shizu. Kino looked at him, slightly surprised.

Master Shizu slowly lifted himself off the sand, still kneeling and his hands supporting his body. Blood continued to flow from his stomach, the knife still lodged deep.

"Neither one. So don't get involved."

Master Shizu looked up and lightly smiled at Kino and myself. His mouth was stained red.

"Ti."

Master Shizu began, looking back at her. Ti suddenly trembled, still holding the second knife. This was the first time I saw Ti's expression change since she first ate the portable rations.

"..."

Her eyes were wide, and her mouth was breathing without a sound. It was the face of a human facing unimaginable terror. The tip of the knife was shaking ever-so-slightly.

"Don't be scared... I'm sorry."

Master Shizu spoke, as he began walking. He approached Ti step by step, walking across the beach. I could only see his face in profile.

We heard a heavy sound, like the ringing of a bell. It was the gate firmly closing shut.

Master Shizu took another step towards Ti and spoke.

"I understand now... I'm sorry. I didn't know, but it still must have been cruel for you to hear..."

Master Shizu coughed. A great deal of blood escaped his mouth and fell to the sand.

But he continued walking towards the knife like a ghost.

"You can't go back to that country now... I guess it can't be helped... It's all my fault. But..."

"..."

Ti silently looked up at Master Shizu. He was right in front of her. She didn't even need the spring contraption. All Ti had to do was move her thin arms forward, and the knife would pierce Master Shizu.

"But... I won't leave you behind... Let's live on... and rely on each other..."

Ti was the only one who could see what kind of a face Master Shizu made as he said these words.

The white-haired girl looked straight into the eyes of the man in front of her and spoke quietly without expression.

"Th... Thank you..."

"There's no need. But you're welcome."

Master Shizu replied cheerfully, and quietly fell to his knees. He then took Ti and the knife in an embrace.

Ti reached her arms towards Master Shizu's neck. The knife fell from her hands and pierced the sand with a quiet sound. Two stick-thin arms cradled Master Shizu's head.

With eyes closed, Ti's small face buried itself next to Master Shizu's. A head of black and a head of white placed next to each other. The ground suddenly shook, and we heard the sound of an engine.

Behind them we could see the black walls slowly getting lower and lower. The Ship Country had begun departing, leaving Ti behind. The walls grew distant at a strangely quick pace.

As Ti held her face close to his, not even looking back, Master Shizu began speaking.

"Looks like it's goodbye to that country... for both you and me..."

Ti nodded her head, still locked in embrace.

"But now you and I..."

"..."

Ti looked up at the western skies and quietly waited for him to continue.

"Now... we can..."

Master Shizu's voice trailed off.

"Oh...!"

Ti screamed softly.

Master Shizu soundlessly fell backwards. Ti fell forward with him, unable to support his weight. Master Shizu's face was pale. The crimson blood at his lips stood out even more. His breathing was extremely shallow. He was still alive, but only just barely.

And...

"No! No! Don't leave me! Please don't leave me here! No!"

Ti screamed over and over again. There was no change in her expression, but she kept shaking her head in denial. Over and over again.

Master Shizu did not respond.

"..."

Suddenly, Ti stopped and looked down at the still Master Shizu.



The next moment, her hand reached for Master Shizu's right side. I could not tell what she was planning.

"This isn't good."

When she raised her hand again, her right hand was gripping a round metal object.

Once this grenade, adorned with a safety pin and lever, exploded, it would half-destroy both Ti and Master Shizu. It seemed like she had taken it from his pocket just now.

"She's planning to die together."

The motorrad explained, and we heard the sound of something clicking. Kino had aimed her revolver and raised the hammer.

If she were to shoot Ti in the head and kill her instantly, the grenade would not go off. It would instead just create one little corpse beside Master Shizu. Ti's left hand headed for the safety pin.

Kino held her breath, prepared to fire. And just as I heard her last breath--

"No!" Master Shizu yelled, still on the ground.

I could not tell at that moment if his words were directed towards Ti or Kino.

At the same time, Ti removed the safety pin. The lever popped out of the handle.

There were four seconds left.

Kino pulled the trigger.

A long and terrifying gunshot rang out across the beach.

—

The bullet flew at the speed of sound. It took less than a tenth of a second.

The bullet that had flown straight at Ti hit its mark--the base of the grenade in her right hand.

Before Ti could even react, the grenade was knocked out of her hand. It flew towards the deserted waterside.

It exploded, creating a small pit in the sand.

The gigantic 'Ship Country' was disappearing into the distance. A wave approached the beach.

The wave washed over the little pit in the sand. When it withdrew, the pit had already gone.

☆時雨沢恵一著作リスト

「と見せかけて	the Beautiful Word」	(後書き)
「実はこれです	the Beautiful Word」	(同)
「たまには変な	the Beautiful Word」	(岡)
「場所を使って	the Beautiful Word」	(門)
「後書きを進め	the Beautiful Word」	(冊)
「て行きたいと	the Beautiful Word」	(聞)
「思っています	the Beautiful Word」	(回)
「ソレデハ」	(問)	
「シバシノⅡ	お付き合いを」	(周)
「ヨロシクⅢ(上)	お願い申しあげます」	(願)
「トウトウⅢ(下)	今作も八巻まで来ましたよ」	(嬉)

Translation:

This looks like a list of my works at first glance, but the truth is I just felt like putting the afterword at an unusual place this time. Anyway, thank you for our partnership. This book has reached its eight volume at last.

Thank you very much for supporting and anticipating this book.



Acknowledgement

My heartfelt gratitude to the following people: my brilliant illustrator
and MediaWorks Dengeki Bunko's editorial staff,

Mr. Kouhaku Kuroboshi

Mr. "Editor-in-charge"





電
撃
文
庫

キノの旅Ⅷ

the Beautiful World

also borrowed the help of the following people

Published	2004 October 25	First Edition
Publisher	Mr. Tatsuo Satou	
Publishing House	Mr. MediaWorks, Inc. 〒 101-8305 1-8 Kanda Suruga-dai, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo Tokyo YWCA Assembly Hall Phone: 03-528-5207 (Editorial)	
Sales Agency	Mr. Kadokawa Shoten Publishing Co., Ltd. 〒 102-8177 2-13-3 Fujimi, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo Phone: 03-3238-8605 (Sales)	
Format	Mr. Yuji Ogikubo (META+MANIERA)	
Printing House	Mr. Asahi Printing Co., Ltd	

Books with missing or disordered pages are quite rare. Was it luck?

The price did not go up so much.

Unauthorized referencing (referring) to all or part of this book, without exceptions, will please Sigsawa.

If you wish to refer to this text, no form of correspondence is needed. Let your imagination explode (Note: Plagiarism is bad.)

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Printed in Japan

ICBM÷8402×2059=?

Being a Dengeki Bunko Author

It has been five years since I made my debut as a novelist with “Kino no Tabi”. ‘Five years’ doesn’t sound much, but if you were a sixth grader when you bought the first volume back in July 1999, you must now be a senior high school student worrying about your university entrance exams. It seemed like a blink of an eye, but it was a long, fun, and somewhat tough journey.

During that time, “Kino no Tabi”, which was born from the manuscript submitted for a newcomer award, has reached its eight volume, and the plans for another series, “Allison”, has been accomplished without incident. My sincerest gratitude to all of you, readers.

Just an aside, this is the first volume I finished writing after I have changed residence. The bed, tea table and small chair I used to write on has become a desk and a Recaro seat (a car seat). I think the difference in the viewing level does not manifest itself at all in the subtlety of my writing style. Believe me.

And from now on, whether I am seated, doing a one-legged stand, handstand, or yoga pose— — no matter what the circumstance or weather, I will be able to write interesting stories that can delight everyone! Quickly! Energetically! One after another! In rapid succession! If only I could..., yeah.

(Editor’s Note: You wish. And the last word is tiny.)

2004 October 10
Keiichi Sigsawa



ANISON

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2060=?

We are the "Anison Singing Troupe". Anison whenever, wherever! Let's go to the karaoke and sing 'til morning! — This is the birth of the stunning Anisong Novels by Waruichi Shigueki!

G0193

やぶーし

ANISON II

Noon and Night Song

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2061=?

Karaoke houses cease operations. The beloved places disappearing one after the other! What will you do now, "Anison Singing Troupe"?! — This shocking development is merely an omen! Here comes the controversial sequel!

G0193

やぶーし

ANISON III (A)

Defend the Mic to the Last

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2062=?

The "Anison Singing Troupe" begins the journey to seek for the legendary mic. But a new enemy stands in their way — The persistent continuation of this tale! Alas, the lyrics are being blurred with tears...

G0193

やぶーし

ANISON III (B)

The Stage Called Intrigue

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2063=?

The "Anison Singing Troupe" gets dispersed. But not a drop of Anison's ardent spirit is lost! — Seeking the legendary lyrics of the third song, the journey continues!

G0193

やぶーし

KINO NO TABI

the Beautiful Socks

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2064=?

"Wear my socks, you say?!" — People getting entangled with the fate of a single rebel, and the worldwide "Anti-Socks Union" shaking history! Brace yourselves for this historical drama!

G0193

やぶーし

KINO NO GOBI

the Beautiful Infection

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2065=?

A change in infection is a change in the heart... The painful and tremulous awakening of love; a poignant love fantasy conveyed through the beautiful Japanese language — Sending you these feelings with endless tears.

G0193

やぶーし

KINO NO OBI

the Beautiful Belt

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2066=?

"That belt will save the world." The hero possessed by the legendary belt. Led to the 'Country of Belts', a shocking truth awaits! A fantasy that will rock the dry-goods industry!

G0193

やぶーし

KINO NO SABI

the Beautiful Rust

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2067=?

A gasping life within deep-red rust. A scientist discovering a devil's research. The fate of the rust attacking mankind and the girl who battles it! Bringing you a sci-fi action set in the near future!

G0193

やぶーし

KINO NO DABI

the Beautiful Cremation

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2068=?

"Fire!" — Enter! The extreme moe novel seriously dealing with cremation! Excitement and strife born from the crematory! The life and death of a being! The shocking controversial work that will make waves in the publishing world!

G0193

やぶーし

KINO NO EBI

the Beautiful Lobster

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2069=?

One day, Kino decided she wanted to eat a shrimp! So she went to the beach! And dove in! And caught shrimp! And cooked it! Pre-senting an ambitious work about opposing social factions on fishing rights!

G0193

やぶーし

KINO NO HOBI

the Beautiful Hobby

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2070=?

Hobbies are what people live for. Hobbies are the lubricants to human life. A girl whose hobby is seeking hobbies, a human drama of finding one's self. An explosion of Shigueki's interests!

G0193

やぶぐーし

KINO NO FUBI

the Beautiful Defect

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2071=?

A tiny defect was discovered in what was believed to be a flawless system in the spaceship. A crisis drawing near the life-preservation system. What will be the fate of the girl who faces this predicament? Get ready for this confined-space action.

G0193

やぶぐーし

KINO NO HIBI

the Beautiful Days

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2072=?

Invigorating days, peaceful days. The girl will always be right there — The traversing paths of the forest-dwelling girl and a visiting traveler. Raise the curtains to a heartfelt fantasy.

G0193

やぶぐーし

DENGEKI PRIZE MURDER CASE

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2073=?

A string of murders across Japan. Unrelated victims at first glance, but they all passed the secondary selection for the Dengeki Prize! Brace yourselves for this shocking mystery hacking its way through the editorial department!

G0193

やぶぐーし

THE AFTERWORD

Waruichi Shigueki

Illustrated by: Hakuboshi Koukuro

ICBM÷8402×2074=?

A story with a 2-page main text and over 200-page afterword. A mentally-troubled author pouring his thoughts in a controversial novel. (Note: This work is expected to run out of print early)

G0193

やぶぐーし

Kino no Tabi Volume 8

—the Beautiful World—

Story Keiichi Sigsawa

Illustrations Kouhaku Kuroboshi

Translators Ella

Untuned Strings

(<http://untuned-strings.blogspot.com/p/index-kino.html>)

Editor Dammitt

BloodyKitty

Moratorius

Fishnchips

an anonymous contributor

User753

Project Hosted at www.baka-tsuki.org



9784840228329



1920193005509

ISBN4-8402-2832-9

C0193 ¥550E

MediaWorks

発行●メディアワークス

定価： 本体550円

※消費税が別に加算されます



自分を強く見せようと力む筆者

しぐさわけい
時雨沢恵一

1972年神奈川県生まれ。実は宇宙人で地球侵略に来ているのだが、誰もそれに気づいていないばかりか、本人もすっかりその事を忘れている。誰か思い出させてやってください——お前はライトノベル作家をしている場合ではないのだと。連絡待っています。かしこ。

【電撃文庫作品】

キノの旅	the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅱ	the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅲ	the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅳ	the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅴ	the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅵ	the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅶ	the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅷ	the Beautiful World
アリソン	
アリソンⅡ	真昼の夜の夢
アリソンⅢ〈上〉	ルトニを車窓から
アリソンⅢ〈下〉	陰謀という名の列車

くろほしこうはく
イラスト：黒星紅白

1974年生まれ。性別：男。九州在住。プレイステーションソフト「サモンナイト」のキャラクターデザインを手がける。フリーでも色々やっています。趣味：プラモデル買い、釣り。

カバー／旭印刷